



ARIA NORTON

A LORD'S  
WHIMSICAL  
GOVERNESS

# A Lord's Whimsical Governess

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ARIA NORTON

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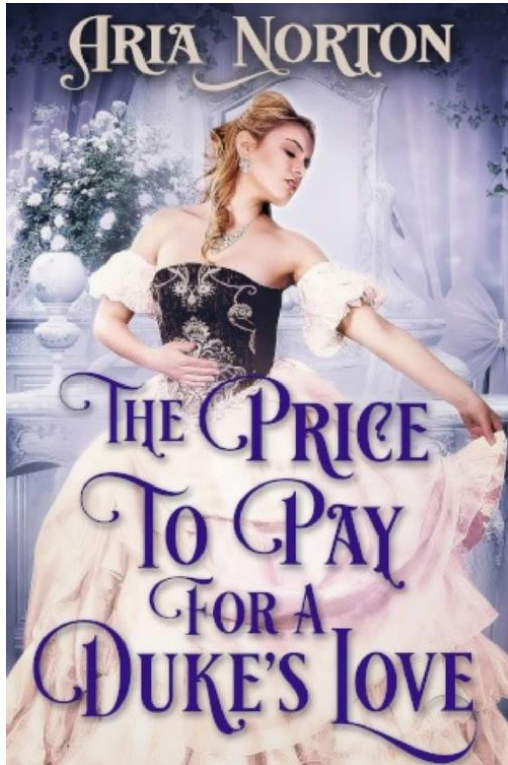
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# A Lord's Whimsical Governess



## Introduction

Elisabeth Steele is in desperate need of a paying position to help her family after her father's untimely death. When she sees an advertisement for a governess position at Hensol Manor, it feels like a miracle. While her fun and imaginative way of teaching quickly wins over her two young pupils, her employer is definitely not as easy to crack. The lord of the manor may be handsome, but he has firm ideas about his younger brothers' education. Forced to walk a fine line between practicing her unusual but effective methods and doing as she's instructed, she can't help but be affected by the Earl's mesmerising gaze. When an intense attraction to this stubborn man is added to the equation, will her growing feelings affect Elisabeth's decision to defy him?

Charles Talbot, Earl of Hensol, is reeling after the sudden death of his mother, which leaves him in charge of his two younger brothers. In the following months, as they chase off successive governesses with their mean tricks, he finds himself at his wit's end. Out of sheer desperation, he hires a local girl with no references, hoping for the best. With her unconventional teaching methods, it becomes clear that the beautiful young woman is not at all what he expected in a governess and he's entranced. Already courting a woman approved by his mother before her passing, how will he handle the startling realisation he's rapidly falling in love with the red-haired beauty that

is Elisabeth?

As Elisabeth and Charles clash over the boys' lessons, their feelings deepen and become harder to ignore. Torn between the wishes of a man she's losing her heart to and her wish to help his two grief stricken brothers, Elisabeth's position becomes increasingly precarious. Will her continued defiance lead to her being turned out of the house in disgrace or will Charles bend, seeing his brothers' happiness and discovering his own too? Will their inevitable conflict tear them apart forever or will their hearts find the path to each other by following the calling of true love?

## Prologue

Charles Talbot, Earl of Hensol, waited outside the door of his mother's bedchamber. His two young brothers, William and Matthew, sat by his side. Matthew kicked his feet back and forth, dangling inches above the floor while William sat in stony silence. A pang of grief shot through Charles' heart.

Their mother was dying. William and Matthew, seven and five years old, would have precious few memories of her, just as they had none of their father. He had died only four years earlier, shortly after Matthew had been born.

Since then, Charles had taken on the weighty responsibility of running the estate and making sure his brothers were cared for. When his mother had fallen ill at the beginning of the year, Charles felt the burden pressing down on him even more. What was he going to do without his mother? She had been his rock while he had learned to run the estate. Now, he would be alone, the man of the house, and a substitute parent to his brothers.

"My Lord?" The doctor eased his head out the door. "You and your brothers may come in now."

Charles ushered William and Matthew into the room but kept the doctor for a moment. "How is she?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid t'will not be long. Her lungs are filling with fluid. There is nothing more to be done."

Charles nodded, his heart breaking. "Thank you for trying to make her comfortable."

"Of course. I'll wait just over here." The doctor trudged to the hearth on the room's far side, sitting down in a chair to rest. Charles had been with his mother all night and into this morning and knew how exhausted the doctor must be as well.

Charles rang for the housekeeper, and she soon appeared. "Please bring the doctor some tea."

"Yes, My Lord."

Charles then turned to the bedside. His brothers waited a few feet away, afraid to go any closer. Their mother's condition had worsened over the last few weeks. William had become increasingly difficult to deal with as he tried to navigate his grief. Nightmares had plagued Matthew, his mind fighting against the thought of losing his mother.

She held her hand out to her boys, trying to smile. She had grown so thin, her cheeks sunken, her skin deathly white. "Come here, my angels," she said to William and Matthew. They approached the bedside tentatively. Matthew reached out and took her hand. William merely stood there, looking down at the shell of a woman who had always been a constant in his life. Now that was about to be gone.

"Hello, Mother," Matthew said. "I caught a butterfly today." That made her smile. "Did you? That is wonderful, Matty. What colour is it?"

"White with black dots. Can I keep it, Mother?"

She squeezed his hand and brought it to her lips, kissing it gently. "Of course, you can." She glanced up at Charles, pain filling her eyes. He knew it was not so much the pain of approaching death but the thought of leaving them, especially her two youngest sons. "You must keep it and think of me every time you look at it."

William sniffed as he listened to the conversation. She turned her attention to him. He took it dutifully, even though Charles could see he was uncomfortable. Charles knew precisely how he was feeling. Perhaps if he didn't allow her to speak her goodbyes, he could stave off death. The wish of a seven-year-old to keep his mother for a little while longer. If only wishes could work miracles.

Charles knelt between the boys, wrapping his arms around their shoulders. "They've been very good, Mother. You should be proud." Tears welled in his eyes, mirroring their mother's.

"Very good. You must all promise to be good ... when I am gone."

William jerked his hand free of her slight grasp. "No! You cannot leave us! I'll never be good again if you do!"

Charles took a moment to recover from the shock. Instead of allowing him to reprimand William, Mother held up her hand. "Will, look at me. Look at me, son, please." When William finally met her gaze, she touched his cheek. "I don't want to leave you, son. If it were in my power, you know I would stay. Your brother will take good care of you, so know." She brushed her fingers through his short brown hair, seeming to take in every memory of his face so she could take it with

her. "I love you, son."

William started to cry then, and Matthew followed, even though unable to understand death's finality. They buried their faces in her arm and wept. Charles stood and gave them their moment, blinking back tears of his own. He had to be strong for them.

"No more tears, now, my angels. Let me speak with Charles for a moment." She drew a ragged breath as the boys stood aside by the housekeeper. Charles sat in a chair next to the bed and took her hand. It felt like ice.

"I need you to be strong for them. Take care of them and be sure they grow up to be men your father and I would be proud of."

"I will, Mother. I promise."

"I know I can count on you. There is one last thing I charge you with." She paused as a fit of coughing seized her. When she was able to speak again, her voice was raspy. "You must find a wife and carry on the family line. Hensol must last to the next generation. Your father worked so hard to keep this estate intact."

Charles let out a breath. Finding a wife was the last thing on his mind right now. However, to ease her departure from this life, he would promise. "I will find a wife, Mother. She will not be able to live up to you when it comes to being mistress of this great estate, but I will try to find someone worthy."

She coughed, rising and shifting over on her side. He placed a hand on

her back, looking around at the doctor. The man simply shook his head, indicating that this was normal. There was nothing he could do to help her. It took her several seconds to recover.

Lying back down on the pillows, she closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath. When she spoke again, her voice was gravelly, no louder than a whisper. "Nonsense. There are several ladies who would do the job credibly – Lady Amelia, for example."

Charles smiled and shook his head with embarrassment. "She would never consider me. I am much too subdued for her type."

His mother grabbed his hand and squeezed, capturing his gaze in earnest. He did not expect a dying woman to be able to squeeze his hand so hard. "Do not wait too long after I am gone. No one can know what this life will bring. It is your duty to keep this estate going, son. It is your duty ..." Her voice carried all the regret of having to leave them. Charles could tell that she was fading fast.

"I promise, Mother. I will do my duty; I swear to you." He waved the boys over, knowing that time was short. William was stoic, standing by the bed while trying to maintain a brave front. Matthew, however, threw his arms over their mother's side and wept.

"Do not leave us, Mama. Please, stay with us."

Charles felt his own tears welling at the corners of his eyes. He knew exactly how Matthew felt. He had cried at his father's bedside, even though he was a full-grown man. They had been very close, and he supposed that a part of grief was also selfishness. He had not felt ready to take over the running of the estate.

*"I believe in you, son. You will do well,"* his father had said right before he passed.

Charles placed a hand on Matthew's back and pulled him into a hug. The boy clung to him as if he were drowning.

"I love you, my boys. All of you. Try to remember me as I was ..."

The doctor came over then and whispered to Charles. "You may want to send the boys away, especially Matthew. The last bit of this can be rough."

"Of course." Charles nodded to the housekeeper, asking her to take the boys to their governess.

The doctor made to leave, but Charles stopped him. "Please, stay. I don't know if I can do this alone."

The older man nodded, smiling sadly. "Of course, My Lord."

Charles sat down and watched the life drain from her face. Her breathing was very loud and crackled. The fluid in her lungs was slowly drowning her. He could not bear to watch but watch he must. No one should be alone as they passed from this life.

He struggled to stay awake, having slept little during the last few



days. He leaned his head against the back of the chair and tried to think of happier times. Before he knew it, he was nodding off.

Awakening with a start a few minutes later, he saw the doctor was standing over his mother, searching for a pulse. "Doctor?"

He turned and shook his head. "It's over. She's gone, My Lord." He took the edge of the sheet and started to cover her face. Standing to join him at the head of her bed, Charles stayed his hand.

"I'll do it," Charles offered. The doctor walked away, turning his back so that he could have some privacy. Charles leaned down and kissed his mother's forehead tenderly. "Goodbye, Mother." He lifted the sheet and covered her face. Taking a few steps away from the death bed, he joined the doctor. "Thank you again for all you've done."

"My deepest condolences, My Lord."

"Thank you." Charles shook his hand and left the room, walking down the hall in a daze. He went to his brother's room to tell them she was gone. Gone. How could she be gone? The reality of it had not quite set in. Perhaps it would take days or even weeks for the realization to sink in.

He opened the door and saw the governess was at the blackboard. She was making them run through their sums, no doubt, to keep their minds occupied. When she spotted him at the door, she halted mid-sentence and excused herself from the room. The boys turned, running to him.

Hugging them, he lowered his voice. "Mama is gone to be with the

angels, boys. It's over now." Matthew dissolved into tears again, but William took a step back and put a hand on Charles' shoulder.

"I shall help you run the estate if you would like. I know there is a lot of work to do."

Charles smiled.

"That is very kind of you, thank you. I shall let you know if I need your assistance, Will. I think I shall need more help with looking after Matty. Can you do that for me?"

Will straightened, puffing out his chest. "I'll look after him."

"Good man." Charles took him by the shoulders, and they all sat down on the wood floor. "We must all be brave and look out for each other now. We are all we have left."

"Shall we make a pact?" William suggested.

"Yes, a marvellous idea. We shall make a pact to always be there for each other, shall we? Here, give me your hands. Good. We've shaken on it, and our pact cannot be broken."

The boys leaned their heads on his shoulders. Charles took a deep breath as they sat in silence. He was their guardian now. He only hoped he would do a good job caring for his brothers.

## Chapter 1

*Six months later*

Charles was working in his study when he heard the knock on the door. He looked up and called for whoever it was to enter before returning his attention to a request from one of his tenants.

When he looked up, his housekeeper was standing before his desk. He put the letter down and motioned for her to take a seat. "What can I do for you, Mrs Taylor?"

She folded her hands dutifully in her lap and took a deep breath before beginning. He could tell this was not going to be a pleasant conversation for her. "My Lord, I appreciate the grief that you and your brothers are experiencing. However, I cannot continue to fulfill the role of housekeeper and governess. Master William and Master Matthew require constant supervision to make sure they stay out of mischief. Their studies are suffering, and my duties as housekeeper are as well."

"I understand. Of course, you know that I have been searching for a new governess for the boys. I hope to have one within the new few weeks." Charles stood and began to pace. Ever since their mother had died, the boys had become increasingly difficult. The governess his mother had employed left shortly after her passing. His brothers tormented her instead of focusing on their studies. She went to find an easier position, where her talents for discipline and education would be appreciated, the former governess had told him.

Charles had begged her stay and had reprimanded the boys. But

nothing he said seemed to make a difference. He was so busy with the estate affairs that he had little time to spend with them. He knew they resented his long trips away. Their behaviour was even worse when he was away.

The last governess had left without notice as soon as he had returned home from the previous trip. That was three weeks ago, and he knew that he was in danger of losing his housekeeper as well if he did not find a governess soon.

"I cannot wait weeks, sir. I do not wish to sound callous or rude, but I did not come here to be the governess. I came to be your housekeeper and make sure that your home is properly managed."

Charles halted, looking down at the woman's worn features. He imagined she would have been a beautiful woman when she was young. He knew that his brothers were running her ragged. It was not fair for him to ask her to take on double the duties without compensation. He would give her a bonus as soon as a new governess was found. "Would you be willing to help me interview new candidates, Mrs Taylor? Perhaps if we help each other, we may find someone quickly?"

Her face brightened at this. "Of course, My Lord. I will send out another advertisement right away!" She stood and curtsied.

"Thank you, Mrs Taylor." When she was gone, he rubbed his hand over the back of his neck, letting out a long sigh. The burden of his responsibilities weighed him down. Finding another governess should have been the least of his worries. However, if he wanted to keep Mrs Taylor, he would have to.

"How can I be expected to run this estate and worry over my brothers every second of the day!" he growled. He would speak with the boys, threaten them if he had to. They had become unruly over the last few

months. His mother would be ashamed of him if she could see. Charles let out another frustrated sigh. He was failing them.

Charles left the study, knowing that he could not focus until he had reprimanded his brothers. Mrs Taylor did not deserve how they were treating her. He stormed up the stairs to the classroom and opened the door.

The scene that confronted him made his blood boil. Instead of sitting down to their studies, his brothers were playing cricket. William threw the ball, and Matty hit it. The ball went sailing across the room and through the window. It shattered, raining glass down on them. They covered their heads and knelt, trying to shield themselves.

"Boys!" Charles yelled, coming into the room. They turned in tandem, their eyes wide with fear. They stood, and William put an arm around Matthew's shoulders. He started to whimper, tears streaming down his face.

Charles felt terrible for scaring Matthew, but he had had enough. This was the last straw. "Come here this instant," he bellowed. "Sit down."

The boys did as they were told, sitting in the desks where they should have been working all along.

Charles towered over them, giving them a stern gaze. "Now, look here. I have just had a talk with Mrs Taylor, and she has informed me that you are not doing your work. And now I come up here to find you playing cricket in the house! Do you know how much windows cost?"

Matthew sniffed, and Charles pulled out a handkerchief for him. He thrust it into his face and scowled, "Wipe your nose and stop snivelling." Kneeling, he softened. "I know that it has been difficult without Mama. However, that is no excuse to torment your governesses and drive me batty. I need to focus on my work with the estate, boys. William, you told me that you wanted to help with the estate. Well, you can help me by being diligent in your studies and making sure Matty does the same."

William rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's just a bloody window. And our governesses teach us nothing of value. They are old and boring."

"Use that language again and I shall take a switch to you. Do you understand?" William backed down and nodded. "Would you rather I send you away to school early? I had hoped to wait until you were a bit older, but if you do not change your behaviour and your attitude, I will have no other choice."

William straightened, and his eyes turned pleading. "No, please, brother, don't send me away yet. Matty couldn't bear it."

He took their hands. "Then I need you to remember our pact. We promised to be there for each other. But you two have not been holding up your end of the bargain. I need you to behave and listen to your governess. When I do find another governess, you will not torment her. You will not play harmful pranks on her and drive her away. Do you understand?"

They both nodded, promising to be good. Charles gave them a stern look to make sure they knew that he was serious. "We promise to be good, Charles. Please don't send us away."

Charles stood. "As long as you keep your end of the bargain, I will not send you away early. Now, come downstairs and have your luncheon so that I can have this room cleaned."

The boys bounded out of the room, and Charles went over to the window. It would take weeks to have this fixed. Yes, another cost and worry added to his burdens. He called for one of the maids to come and clean up the glass. Returning to his study, he continued his answer to his tenant he had been handling before Mrs Taylor interrupted him.

After finishing the letter, he found that he needed a bit of fresh air. Leaving the study, he walked out into the hall and called for his horse to be saddled. He could check on the progress of the new wall he was having built on the edge of the property. His mount was brought to the front of the house, and he quickly got up in the saddle.

Riding off towards the western section of the wall, he let his mind wander. The warm breeze blew his short black hair as he rode. He took a deep breath and felt his calm return. If only he could spend all his time out of doors instead of in that stuffy office.

When he reached the wall, the foreman gave him an update. "We will have this section done by the end of the week. Then we'll move on down towards the south-facing wall and begin the reconstruction of the collapsed areas."

"Very well done, Jarvis. It looks very sturdy," Charles praised.

"Rider coming, sir!" one of the workers announced. Charles looked up and followed where the man pointed. He shielded his eyes against the

sun, recognizing his old friend, Lord Benjamin Graham. He raised his hand in greeting and went to meet him at the wall.

"Hello, old chap!" Benjamin said as he approached. His horse whinnied as he reined him to a halt on the opposite side of the wall.

"Hello, Ben. What brings you here?" Charles led his steed over to the wall and remounted.

"I came to see you. We've not seen you since we came back from the wedding trip." Benjamin was beaming. He and his wife, Anna, had married just a few months ago.

"I am glad to see you, my friend. Come, ride over to the southern sections with me." Charles clicked his lips and spurred his horse into a trot. Benjamin rode back a few yards and jumped the low wall, joining Charles as he rode down the stone wall.

"How was Europe?" Charles asked, inspecting the stonework as they went.

"Intoxicating. I was made for married life." He smiled. "When are you going to take the plunge, old fellow?"

Charles rolled his eyes. "I'm not that old. I suppose I shall have to marry soon. I did promise Mother I would find a wife."

Benjamin quieted, knowing that Charles was struggling to adjust to this new way of life. It had only been six months since his mother had died. "Anna has a cousin from Manchester ..." he teased, trying to lighten the mood. However, it was challenging to lighten Charles'



spirit, no matter what was going on. He was a stoic sort of man, always very serious, thinking of his duty first and foremost.

Charles laughed, though, to Benjamin's surprise. "I already have a woman in mind, Ben. You know that. Mother had her heart set on me marrying Lady Amelia. I suppose she is as good a choice as any."

"Ever the romantic," Benjamin said sarcastically. It was his turn to roll his eyes.

Charles waved him off. Benjamin had always been a bit cavalier, refusing to comply with the demands placed on him. His wife had been a housemaid. His father had objected to the match, of course, but Benjamin refused to budge.

Anna had turned out to be a diamond in the rough, slipping into her role as if she had been born to it. She seemed to be born a princess, with all the extraordinary graces and charm that came with the station. If not by blood, Anna was a lady by attitude.

"I don't have time to be romantic. Mother was right. I need to find a wife who can help me with the estate. I need to make a good impression on people and show them that I am fit to run this estate."

"Not to mention you need an heir to pass it on to. You are doing well with the improvements. The wall is coming along nicely, and I've seen your plans to improve the tenant housing. It's all very ambitious."

"It's the least I can do. The tenants deserve warm places to sleep. Did you know my grandfather was the last one who put new roofs on the

tenant houses?" Charles clicked his tongue. "However, you are right. I wonder sometimes if I have taken on too many projects at once. And then there are the boys ..." He could feel his anger boiling again as he thought about the broken window. He had to remind himself they were just boys. Once, he had been the rowdy, adventuresome youth he now saw in his brothers.

Those days were over now. Charles squared his shoulders, and Benjamin slapped him on the back. "You're doing a fine job with the boys. Do not let anyone tell you differently, my friend, including yourself."

## Chapter 2

Elisabeth Steele wiped her brow with the back of her arm and continued kneading the lump of bread dough. Her younger sister, Harriet, sat in the corner with the mending.

"Mother!" Elisabeth called, plopping the dough into a bowl. She covered it with a fresh towel and left it in the window to rise, warmed by the sunshine.

"Yes, Elisabeth. What is it?" Her mother came into the kitchen carrying the finished laundry from the line. "Here, take this basket. Have you finished with the bread?"

Elisabeth rinsed her hands and dried them before taking the wicker basket. She began folding the clothes and placing them on the chair beside her. "It's rising in the sill."

"Good girl. Now, if you could get a position as a housemaid or even a cook, then we would be set." Her mother reminded her at least twenty times a day of their dire circumstance. Life had been difficult since her father had died two years prior. Her mother worked harder than anyone she knew, taking in extra washing to make ends meet. However, it was still not enough.

"I am trying, Mother. Since I was able to finish school before Father died, I should be able to get a position, perhaps even as a governess." Elisabeth had done her best to help her mother with the washing, staying up late into the night most days to try and help her. Along with the washing, her mother had five children. Elisabeth was twenty-three, an old maid in her mother's opinion. *"Since you refuse to get*

*married, the least you can do is get a job and help me with the bills."*

It was not that Elisabeth had an aversion to the idea of marriage. She simply knew she did not want to marry just anyone, wanting more from life than what her mother had settled for. Harriet, now sixteen, was about to finish school. However, Elisabeth did not want her to have to work as a housemaid. She had encouraged her to finish her schooling first, as there would be more opportunities afforded her.

"Look at this!" The ladies turned to see Elisabeth's brothers crashing into the house. Tom was the third child born to her parents, and at twelve years old, he was taking his new role as 'man of the house' very seriously. He was waving a news sheet in the air as he came in and promptly thrust it into Elisabeth's hands.

"What is this?" She flipped it over, and Tom turned the pages for her.

"Here, in the advertisement section. 'A top-notch governess'. That is what you have been looking for? And it is just over in the next town at Hensol Manor."

"It's exactly what I've been looking for, Tom. Well done. Mother, may I finish the folding later? I will go and answer the advertisement right away."

"Of course, my dear. Of course. However, I will finish the folding, and Tom will take your letter down the manor when you've finished."

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It did not take long for Elisabeth to receive an answer from Hensol Manor. A Mrs Taylor wrote to her saying that they would be eager to interview Elisabeth at her earliest convenience. Elisabeth put on a shawl and decided to walk down that afternoon. She did not want the position to go to someone else.

Her mother sent Tom to walk down with her, and he described the beautiful mansion to her as they went. She instructed him to wait for her at the gate and was struck by the great house's magnitude. It was an imposing stone structure, which she assumed had been a castle at one point. She could tell that new sections had been added in recent years. It was a beautiful house, although she could see some improvements to the roof were being made.

She knocked on the door and was greeted by a stern-looking butler. "Yes, what is it?" He looked her up and down as if she were a stray kitten.

"Hello, sir. My name is Elisabeth Steele. I was told to come for an interview by a Mrs Taylor." She handed him the letter to show that she spoke the truth, but he had no chance to examine it.

"It is alright, Mr Becket. Miss Steele is here on my invitation." A tall woman dressed in black came to the door and extended her hand. The butler huffed and handed the letter back to Elisabeth, mumbling for her to come in.

Mrs Taylor motioned her to follow, taking her down the hall and a flight of stairs to her office near the kitchens. "I am sorry for Mr Becket. He has been here for more years than either of us have been alive. Old age has made him grouchy. Please do sit down." She motioned to a chair before her small desk and then was seated herself.

She folded her hands in her lap and took a moment to glance at Elisabeth's dress.

"You come from the village, I presume? It did not take you long to get here."

"No, Ma'am. I live only over the next hill. I hope it is alright that I have come so soon."

"Of course. We are quite eager to find someone to fill this position. Tell me, Miss Steele. What is your story? You do not seem like a young lady that should need a governess position."

Elisabeth had been expecting this question. She took a deep breath before diving in. "It is a matter of necessity, Madam. My father was a barrister, but we fell on hard times. I was away at school when he fell ill. I had finished my schooling and had been helping as a teacher's assistant. Then my father lost his clients, and we had to move out to the country, to a small cottage that had belonged to my aunt, God rest her soul. My father died shortly after the move from town, and my mother and I have been struggling to make ends meet ever since."

"I am sorry to hear that. But you say you were a teaching assistant?"

"Yes, Mrs Taylor. The headmistress of the school was going to give me my own class, as well, if I had not had to leave to help my mother. She has been taking in extra washing to help make ends meet."

Mrs Taylor studied her, shaking her head. "I am sorry this has happened to you and your family. I need to be sure you will rise to the challenge, though. The Masters Talbot can be quite headstrong boys."

“Do not have any fears in that, Mrs Taylor. I have two brothers who are quite rowdy. As far as my qualifications, I can send a letter to the headmistress and ask for a reference if you like. I am sure she would vouch for my skills in teaching the little ones. How old are the young Masters Talbot, may I ask?”

“William is seven, and Matthew is five. I think it would be wise to send off for a referral from the headmistress, but I can handle that if you will give me the name of the school.”

Elisabeth told her and gave her the address, also. When she was finished jotting it down, Mrs Taylor stood and shook her hand. “It was very nice to meet you, Miss Steele. I see no reason not to hire you, on a trial basis, that is. Lord Talbot will want to conduct his own interview. Can you come back in the morning? I’m sure he will find your skills satisfactory.”

“Thank you, Mrs Taylor! Yes, I will be here bright and early tomorrow morning!”

Mrs Taylor smiled and showed her to the front door, waving as she walked briskly down the drive to meet Tom.

When Elisabeth and Tom returned, Elisabeth burst through the door. “Mother! I have been hired for the position!” she squealed as they came into the house, their cheeks rosy from the long walk and the excitement.

“Praise the Lord! It seems things are finally starting to turn around for us. When do you start?” Her mother shooed the younger children out of the house and made Elisabeth sit at the table.

"Tomorrow morning. The housekeeper, Mrs Taylor, interviewed me and said I was perfect for the job."

"That's wonderful."

"And I get every second Tuesday off, so I will be able to come home and visit you all." Elisabeth was beaming with pride. She had known that holding out for a teaching job would be best, even though she had heard the life of a governess was quite lonely. No matter. She would have her books and her imagination to keep her company. And her new pupils, of course.

"Do you think this situation will give us what we need?" her mother asked as she stirred the stew pot.

"Mrs Taylor said that Lord Talbot pays every quarter. It will be twenty pounds per anum. You may expect the first installment in July." Elisabeth stood and hung her shawl on the peg. "We're positively rich!"

Her mother shook her head. "Of course, it is a blessing. I only wish they paid by the week instead of having to wait a whole three months."

"We shall have to make do, Mother. At least it is a job, and brighter times are on the horizon." Elisabeth, ever the optimist, put the whole idea of money out of her head for the time being and sat down to check the sums she had set her younger siblings to do. "Really, Tom. Two times two does not equal twenty-two. How do you expect to get anywhere in life if you do not take your studies seriously? Do them all again."



He gave her a mischievous wink and wiped the slate clean. "Yes, Teacher."

The next morning, her mother saw her off, tears brimming in the corners of her eyes. "Be a good girl, my pet. And do write to us from time to time to let us know how you're getting on."

"I will, Mother." Elisabeth hugged her goodbye and walked out of the house, early morning mist swirling at her feet. She waved at the little wooden gate and headed down the lane.

By the time she arrived at Hensol Manor, the sun had fully risen, lighting up the face of the elegant house. It was even more breathtaking in the warmth of the sun, the birds chirping as they hopped from branch to branch. She stopped for a moment and took in the scene. "Yes, I think I shall like living here."

She went up to the front door and knocked. The butler opened the door with a scowl. "Servants' entrance." He pointed round to the left side of the house and closed the door in her face.

"Well, it seems the butler is not a morning person," she said under her breath. She found the servants' entrance and went in without knocking. Finding the cook at the stove, she cleared her throat and gave a cheery "Good morning!"

The woman turned around and smiled at her. "You must be the governess. I'll let Mrs Taylor know you've arrived. Set your bag down on the chair if you like. Maggie, pour Miss Steele a cup of tea."

Maggie came over with a steaming hot kettle and poured the water over a tray of leaves.

"Thank you." Elisabeth sat down and placed the carpetbag at her feet. The hem of her dress was damp with the early morning dew. She had taken a shortcut across a field, hoping she would have time to change before meeting her charges.

"Ahh, Miss Steele. Prompt, just as you said you would be. Come with me," Mrs Taylor said as she came into the room. Elisabeth took a quick sip of tea and followed her.

"Thank you for the tea," she whispered to Maggie as she followed Mrs Taylor into the hall.

"I'll take you in to meet Lord Talbot now, and then you can go up and get acquainted with the boys."

Elisabeth looked down at her dress. "I had hoped to change before I met Lord Talbot, ma'am. First impressions, you know."

"He expressly asked that you be shown in as soon as you got here." Mrs Taylor continued her upstairs climb, her brisk walk forcing Elisabeth to trot to keep up with her.

"Oh, well. I hope he doesn't mind my appearance. I walked across a field and ..."

"Straighten up. Answer his questions as succinctly as you can. He does not like waste, least of all with words." Mrs Taylor looked down at her hem and frowned. "Oh, well. You'll have to do. Come along."

Mrs Taylor knocked and opened the door to the study, announcing that the new governess was here. Elisabeth did her best to swallow the lump in her throat, pushing down her nervousness. Lord Talbot stood as she came into the room. He nodded in greeting, and she dipped a slight curtsy.

Mrs Taylor stood at her side, motioning for her to drop the carpetbag. She did so and then looked back up at Lord Talbot's foreboding features. He was much younger than she had imagined, with a handsome face and piercing hazel eyes.

"Good morning, Miss Steele. Please do sit down." He motioned for her to take a seat before the imposing mahogany desk. She came forward and sat, smoothing her skirts. She folded her hands demurely in her lap and told herself that this was not an interview. She already had the position. All she needed to do was behave naturally.

"How long have you been teaching, Miss Steele?" He gazed at her with such severity that she felt she was back at the girl's school being reprimanded by the teacher.

"When I finished my education at boarding school, I was made an assistant. That is where I took my training as a teacher, My Lord."

"And why did you not stay at the school to teach?"

"My father died two years ago, and my mother needed me, sir."

His tone softened at this. "My condolences." Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Now, how would you describe your teaching methods, Miss Steele? My brothers may be a bit behind in their studies. I'm sure Mrs Taylor has made you aware that we lost my mother earlier in the year?"

"Yes, she did. My condolences, as well, My Lord." Elisabeth was starting to feel more at ease now they had found some common ground. The death of a parent, especially one that had been kind and good, was an ordeal to go through at any age. "As to my methods, My Lord, I prefer to use a hands-on approach with my charges. I find that my pupils can absorb the lessons better if they are taught in a fun and engaging way."

Lord Talbot glanced at Mrs Taylor, a grim expression clouding his eyes. "Yes, well. I believe my brothers have had enough of fun and entertainment. They require discipline and structure now." He signalled that the interview was over. "I would like to hire you on a trial basis, Miss Steele, to see if you are a good fit for my brothers. The fact that you have never worked as a governess and have only worked teaching at a girl's school is of some concern to me. Let us see if you are up to the task of teaching rowdy young boys."

She stood as well, curtsying as she had done before. "Yes, My Lord. I shall do my best."

"Miss Steele. I must charge you to adhere to my wishes as regards your teaching style. My brothers have grown far too lax. William needs to prepare for going off to Eton next year, and Matthew will not be far

behind him. No fairytales. Do I have your word on that?"

Elisabeth swallowed. "Yes, sir. As I said, I will do my best to teach them everything they will need."

"Very well. You are dismissed. Mrs Taylor will show you to your quarters." Lord Talbot turned his attention back to his work, seeming to forget she was even standing there.

"Good day, Lord Talbot," Elisabeth mumbled and followed Mrs Taylor out of the room.

"This way." Mrs Taylor took her to the third floor and then up into the attic where the servants' quarters were located. "This is your room. I know it does not look like much, but it's tolerably warm and clean."

Elisabeth had only a moment to look around and deposit her carpetbag on the bed before Mrs Taylor whisked her away again. "Is Lord Talbot always so severe, Mrs Taylor?"

Mrs Taylor smiled knowingly. "Lord Talbot is a very busy man. But he has a good heart. It takes a while for him to warm up to people. Don't take his severity too personally. Just keep your head down and mind what he says. You'll do just fine." They came out of the stairwell on the second floor, coming to the schoolroom door. "Now, I hope you are ready to meet the young Masters Talbot. They can be quite a handful."

"I have two younger brothers, Mrs Taylor. I'm sure I can handle them."

"I certainly hope you can. Good luck." Mrs Taylor turned the knob and left her at the classroom door. Elisabeth suddenly felt nervous, wondering if the boys would be more work than she had bargained

for. She took a deep breath and entered the room, praying they would like her.

## Chapter 3

After Miss Steele left his study, Charles followed them from the room, heading up to the schoolroom where the boys were studying. However, before he got to the classroom door, he turned and slipped through what looked like an ordinary closet door. Charles stepped into a small room and closed the entryway, opening a peephole. He looked into the classroom, watching as the boys talked in a whisper. No doubt they were discussing the arrival of their new governess.

"I hope she is pretty. The last governess had an awful ugly wart on her chin." Matthew screwed up his nose at the memory of the 'ugly' governess.

"She was nothing compared to Miss Abernathy. She had black teeth in the front," William stated matter-of-factly. Charles chuckled softly at this. He remembered a few of his own governesses whom he had found particularly frightening in their appearance. They were in for a pleasant surprise with Miss Steele. Even if he was not sure about her teaching strategy, he had to admit she was beautiful. It had taken all his fortitude to keep his bearings when she had walked into his study.

Elisabeth walked into the classroom, her back straight and her face serious. "This is a good start," he thought. She made her way over the boys, clasping her hands behind her back.

"Hello. My name is Miss Steele. I'm to be your new governess." Charles could tell her voice quaked a bit as she spoke. He didn't blame her, knowing that Mrs Taylor had probably told her of all the pranks his brothers had played on the previous governesses.

William and Matthew stood, smirks on their faces. William stepped forward and stuck his hand out in a very grown-up gesture. "Good day to you, Miss Steele. I am Harry Ramsbottom." He stepped back in line with Matthew, who covered his mouth and snickered. Charles could not see Elisabeth's face but hoped that she would reprimand him. She stayed silent, however, and Matthew stepped forward. "And I am Uriah Ramsbottom. Pleased to meet you, Miss Steele." Matthew shook her hand and gave a bow from the waist. He then stepped back in line with William. They both waited for Miss Steele's response, trying not to crack smiles. They did not do a very good job.

"Well," Elisabeth said, starting to pace in front of the boys. "Those are very odd names. I'm sure you get a lot of teasing about them. I shall try not to hold your strange names against you." She turned her back on the boys and cracked a smile, trying to maintain her strict posture. She turned around again, and to Charles' surprise, burst into laughter.

The boys must have been surprised as well, expecting a reprimand instead of giggles. They dissolved into laughter, rolling on the floor in hysterics. Charles growled under his breath. She was not off to a good start.

He opened the hidden door and stomped out of the room, rounded the corner, and entered the classroom. They all straightened, the boys getting off the floor. The boys cast their eyes down, sensing that Charles was cross with them. And indeed, he was.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, his voice stern. He looked from William to Matthew and finally to Elisabeth.

Elisabeth stepped forward and folded her hands in front of her. "Lord Talbot. The boys and I were just introducing ourselves."



"I saw how they introduced themselves. And you said nothing, Miss Steele. That is not how I would expect a governess to respond."

"Indeed? How did you see, My Lord? Are there secret passages behind the walls of Hensol Manor?"

Matthew stepped forward, taking her hand. "Yes, there are lots of hidden passages. William and I can show you ..."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Matthew. Sit down at your desks. Both of you. I will speak with Miss Steele alone." He stormed out of the room, expecting Elisabeth to be right on his heels.

She turned to William and Matthew, and he heard her instruct them to sit down. "I shall be right back." Waiting for her to come out in the hall, he noticed her graceful movements, her chin lifted high. She wasn't cowed by his manner, which made him feel a little uncomfortable. He was not used to having his instructions disregarded.

"You seem to have a very short memory, Miss Steele."

She raised an eyebrow, looking for a moment like she would challenge him. However, she clenched her jaw and answered to the negative. "Then why did you allow them to do that without scolding them?"

Elisabeth's expression softened, and she looked back at the boys watching the discourse from the safety of the schoolroom.

Lord Talbot closed the door, and Miss Steele jumped at the loud noise.

"It was a harmless joke, Lord Talbot. I hardly think a silly prank like that deserves the switch."

"On the contrary. They need a strong disciplinarian if this is going to work."

"I like to get to know my pupils before I lay down the law, sir. Do not worry. They will learn all that is required of them."

"See that they do." Charles suddenly became distracted by her loveliness once again. Her blue-green eyes were like nothing he had ever seen, at once demure and sparked with fire. Her red-tinged hair was pulled back in a simple ribbon, tiny curls framing her face. He realized she was waiting for him to continue. He shook his head, angry at himself for allowing her to distract him. "Resume your duties."

"I have it in hand, sir. You may count on me." Elisabeth turned and walked back into the classroom, closing the door behind her.

Charles stalked down the hall and back to his study, taking his time to get there. Usually, servants cowered in his presence. Not Miss Steele, though. Her defiance at once angered and intrigued him. He had a feeling he was going to regret hiring her. Frankly, he had no better option at the moment. Hers was the first answer to his advertisement that he had had in weeks. He could not afford to waste any more time looking for a governess for the boys. She would have to do for now.

Matthew had never warmed to any of the governesses he'd hired since

his mother's passing. To watch him take Miss Steele's hand in the classroom had been a shock. How had she got him to trust her so quickly? Children were usually the best judges of character.

Charles huffed as he entered the study once more. He was allowing himself to get distracted again. She was an employee. It was unprofessional and dangerous for him to think of her in any other way than just the young woman teaching his brothers. Still, she was stunning, and her confidence was attractive.

"Focus," he whispered to himself. He needed to concentrate on the many projects happening in tandem around the estate. But more importantly, he needed to find a wife.

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*Charles stood in the middle of the ballroom floor, searching for his partner. The masquerade was the high point of the season here in London. Why had Lady Amelia left him standing there all alone? The other couples were starting to notice, their gazes cold and accusing. Then, a young woman with red-tinged hair stepped away from the crowd.*

*"Lord Talbot? Shall we dance?"*

*He took Elisabeth in his arms, her blue-green eyes staring out at him from behind a simple black mask. It felt so good to hold her. But then he remembered Lady Amelia and started looking for her again. As he twirled Elisabeth around the dance floor, she suddenly reached up and lifted his mask up, revealing his face.*

*The other couples vanished, and they stood alone in the middle of the ballroom. He felt exposed under her scrutiny like every flaw was right there on his face for her to see. She reached up and touched his cheek. "I knew it was an act."*

Charles awoke with a start. He sat up in bed, the strange dream still hanging around him like a mist. He shook his head and crawled out of bed. Stepping to the window, he parted the curtains. It was still dark outside, with a hint of light touching the eastern horizon. He raked a hand through his short black hair, letting out a breath. The dream had felt so real.

He knew that he should not put much stock on it, but he felt exposed even so. Miss Steele had been at Hensol Manor only a matter of hours, and she was already putting him on edge. What did it mean that it was all an act? He couldn't be sure on that point, but he knew he had to forget it and move on. He was not one to go chasing gypsies or the like so they could interpret nightmares and read fortunes. He had enough to worry about with all the improvements needed to his tenants' housing and the repairs that needed to be done on the manor. He did not need superstition and silly dreams adding to his burdens.

He dressed in a simple shirt and breeches and headed down to the library. Surely, he could find something to distract him. It had long been his practice to read to clear his mind. He would not be expected to rise for several hours hence.

As he rounded the corner, however, the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He was not alone. A lone candle burned on the table, casting shadows with its tiny circle of light. He looked up, spotting Elisabeth standing on the ladder in her nightdress, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

"Good morning."

Elisabeth gasped and nearly fell off the ladder as he came near. Leaning her head against the top rung, she let out a breath. "Lord Talbot, you frightened me." She climbed down and wrapped her shawl closer around her shoulders. "Forgive me; I did not think anyone would be awake at this hour."

"My thinking exactly." He knew his voice sounded harsh, even though he had not meant to. "I prefer to rise early."

"Likewise, My Lord. Mrs Taylor told me that you allow your servants to borrow books. I hope that it's alright I am here. I was going to come and ask after breakfast, but it seems fortune has smiled on me."

He was caught up watching her lips move as she spoke.

"Sir?" she asked when he did not immediately respond.

He closed his eyes and looked over his shoulder. "Yes, I apologize. There is a ledger by the door that I ask you fill out when you borrow anything. Just note it there so I can keep track of things."

"Of course, My Lord."

"Have you found something?"

She held up a book and allowed him to read the title on the spine. "Shakespeare's Sonnets. Why am I not surprised?" His voice sounded cynical, which was not what he had intended. Why was he being so churlish?

She took a step towards him, placing a hand on his cheek.

He jumped, surprised by her impertinence.

"I know that under all your bluster, you are a romantic at heart. You've not fooled me."

Charles tried to step away but seemed glued to the spot. What was happening? "Miss Steele, this is quite inappropriate ..."

He closed his eyes, trying to think.

When he opened them again, he was staring sideways at the bookcase in his study. Looking around, he tried to make sense of things. Had it all been a dream? He looked down at the book lying open on the desk. He must have dozed off at his desk.

He couldn't imagine Elisabeth would do anything so bold as what he had dreamed she'd done. The thought sent warmth through his entire body. Why had he allowed her to upend him so entirely?

"She's a servant," he reminded himself. He picked the book up off the desk and was stunned to see the title— *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. He

closed the book with a thud and tossed it onto the end table, gooseflesh rising on his arms. He needed to harden his heart against the fair Elisabeth. She was proving to be more dangerous than he had expected.

## Chapter 4

Elisabeth watched Lord Talbot as he spun on his heels and headed back down the stairs. She was astounded by his interruption and subsequent chastisement. She had hardly been expecting him to spy on her and his brothers. What kind of man was she dealing with?

She went back into the classroom, determined not to let his behaviour unnerve her. Clenching her jaw, she did her best not to let her irritation show in front of her new young charges. "Well, I think we've settled that. Why don't we start again, and you can tell me your real names?"

Matthew stepped forward first and introduced himself, properly this time. "Good day, Miss Steele. I am Matthew Talbot, and I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

She smiled and laughed at his precocious manner. "It is a pleasure to meet you, sir. And you?"

"I am Master William Talbot. The pleasure is mine, madam." He bowed at the waist and winked up at her. She had the feeling these boys were going to be a lot of fun to teach.

"Madam? How very gallant of you, Master William. Now, seeing that your brother is cross with me for allowing you to get away with such a prank, I think we should get on with our studies. Tell me, have you a spacious garden?" The boys looked at her with confusion.

"Yes, we have a garden. Of course, we have a garden." Matthew glanced at his brother as if to add his confirmation.



"Good. It is a lovely day, and it is begging to be enjoyed. Let us go out and have our lessons on the grass, shall we?"

"Lessons outside?" William asked.

Elisabeth smiled. Clearly, the boys had only ever had unimaginative older women as governesses.

"Of course. Fresh air does not impede the ability to learn. Quite the contrary, in my experience. The fresh air helps one soak up all the knowledge it can get hold of. What do you say? Would you like to go outside for a while?"

"Ever so much!" Matthew clapped, jumping up and down.

Elisabeth looked around for a blanket that would be suitable to spread out on the grass. She found one in the corner and took it up in her arms. "Right. Come along, then."

The boys followed her out of the room and down the servants' stairwell, coming out into the kitchen. They greeted the cook, who was used to seeing them in the kitchen from time to time.

"She lets me lick the bowl when she is making cakes sometimes," Matthew told Elisabeth as they walked outside.

"How very kind of her. Now, how about you boys show me around the grounds, and we'll get better acquainted." Elisabeth tucked her hands under the folds of the blanket, enjoying the sunshine as they walked.

"This was Father's favourite place in the garden. Charles told us that he built this fountain for Mama," William said, motioning towards the beautiful fount. Elisabeth joined the boys at the fount's edge and listened to the water splashing happily for a moment.

"It is a thing to behold, to be sure. Your father must have loved your mother very much."

Matthew hung his head. "I don't remember him. I was only a year old when Papa died."

Elisabeth's heart went out to him. William chimed in, "I don't remember much of him either. I was only three when he died. Charles has told us a lot about him, but it's not really the same thing."

"I agree. I'm so sorry for you, boys. I know what it's like to lose a father. My Papa died two years ago." She sat down on the lip of the fountain with them and took a deep breath. "It's much too pretty a day to be sad, though. Shall we continue our walk around the garden? I see some very lovely trees up yonder."

The boys lit up. "Isn't this fun, Will? Ms Abernathy never let us come outside during lessons." He ran ahead of Elisabeth and William, jumping to try to catch a butterfly.

Elisabeth grinned at his enthusiasm. She had found that boys were much more adept at grasping concepts when they had hands-on teaching. At least, her brothers had been so inclined, and it seemed that the young Talbot boys were the same. She supposed that little boys were much alike, no matter their station in life.

"What is your favourite subject, William?"

"You can call me Will if you like. Everyone does."

"Thank you, Will. I shall be honoured," Elisabeth replied. They caught up to Matthew, who was climbing a small maple tree.

William clasped his hands behind his back and thought for a moment. "I like maths. It is my easiest subject, and I like trying to solve problems. Ms Abernathy never gave me any hard ones, so I got bored a lot."

Elisabeth nodded. "I happen to love maths as well. We shall have to see if we can't come up with some hard problems for you to solve."

William looked as if he longed to join Matthew in the tree but held back. She glanced up at Matthew, fearless as he climbed to the higher branches. "Would you climb up there with Matthew, please? I would hate him to fall."

William lit up and went straight for the lower branches. He climbed quickly to catch up with Matthew. "Don't worry, Matty, I'll keep you safe."

"I'm alright," Matthew protested. They both seemed to be very independent little boys.

"Now, can either of you tell me what kind of tree this is?" Elisabeth shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up at the boys teetering on one of the highest branches.

"This is a maple tree," William answered.

"Very good. Now, come down to one of the lower branches. I can't have you two breaking your necks on my first day."

"One should think you wouldn't want us to break our necks at all."

"True. But if one is going to fall out of a tree, one should at least have the decency to wait until their new governess has been with them a week." She winked at them, and they climbed down as she spread the blanket out on the ground. Matthew sat down next to her, settling in closely.

"Can you boys tell me how a tree makes its food?" Elisabeth plucked a fallen leaf up from the grass and twirled the stem between her fingers. They both shook their heads. "It's a process called photosynthesis."

"Photo-what?" Matthew screwed up his face at the idea.

"*Photosynthesis*," Elisabeth repeated. The boys copied her and then settled down to listen to her impromptu lesson. "It is how plants create their food, using sunlight and water. You know that we as humans need oxygen to survive, correct?"

They both answered in the affirmative, spellbound by her descriptions. "Well, when we exhale, we create carbon dioxide. That's the case with animals as well. We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. Plants are the opposite." William came down from the tree then and joined them on the blanket. She handed each of them a leaf and had them look closely at it.

"Leaves capture the sunlight and send the energy to the rest of the tree, which helps it grow. During the process of photosynthesis, the tree 'breathes in' carbon dioxide and releases oxygen. Isn't that fascinating?"

"They give us oxygen?"

"Yes, they do."

"How very clever of God to design it that way," William said matter-of-factly.

Elisabeth laughed at his childlike faith. "Yes, it was quite clever, wasn't it? And now, we should continue with our tour." She offered her hands to the boys and pulled them up. They helped her fold up the blanket, William offering to carry it this time. Matthew took her hand as they walked and whispered, "I like you."

Her heart warmed. "I like you too, Master Matthew."

"My brothers called me Matty," he said.

She nodded and squeezed his hand. "Well, I should be glad to call you Matty as well, if it pleases you?"

"Yes, it would please me very much." He smiled up at her and pointed at one of the trees standing at the far end of the garden. "What's that one called?"

"That is an ash. They are wonderful for climbing, too." The boys raced ahead of her and started their climb. She watched from the ground, charging them to be careful. She quizzed them on the photosynthesis lesson again and found that each had an excellent memory.

"I can see the new wall from here!" William shouted.

"Let me see! Let me see!" Matthew joined his brother and looked out over the rolling hills beyond the garden. "It stretches out for miles!"

"Of course it does. Charles is making it surround the whole estate. And we own a lot of land."

"You boys look like you're in the birds' nest of a pirate ship," Elisabeth commented.

"We *are* pirates!" Matthew shouted, whooping and hollering like a swashbuckling buccaneer. "I'm Captain Hodges, and I throw people in the sea."

"No, I'm captain because I'm older. You can be first mate," William corrected. Matthew had no problem with this, as long as they could stay up in the tree.

After a few minutes, they pretended to see Elisabeth through their spyglass. "Teacher off the port bow!" William announced. "We should hold her for ransom."

They both climbed down to the lower branches and coerced her into climbing up into the tree with them. She rolled her eyes. "Very well." She bent over and grabbed the back of her skirt, pulling it between her legs and tucking it into the belt at her waist. She started to climb, much to the boys' surprise, and sat on the lowest limb. "There now, I suppose I'm your prisoner. I hope you feed your prisoners well because I've been lost at sea for three days and had nothing to eat or drink."

The boys beamed down at her, happy that she was playing along with their game. "Ye'll be on bread and water and be happy about it!" the captain said. "First mate, be sure she doesn't escape!"

The game went on for quite some time, ending when they made Elisabeth walk the plank. She jumped out of the tree and landed on her feet. "Well, now that you've got rid of your prisoner, I suppose you must be famished. Shall we go in so you can have your luncheon?"

The boys were eager for their lunch and came down, skipping ahead of her to the house. When they came to the kitchen door, William turned to her. "Miss Steele," he whispered, "your skirt."

She looked down, realizing that her hem was still tucked into the belt. "Ahh, yes." She untucked it and smoothed her skirt down. "Thank you, Will. That would have been embarrassing."

They made their way into the kitchen, and she announced that the boys would take their meal up in the classroom. The cook smiled at them as they passed through her kitchen and back up the stairs. Thankfully, Lord Talbot had given up spying on them and was not in the schoolroom when they arrived.

She was still a little upset about the lecture he had given her, but she knew now that the boys responded well to her more hands-on approach. If she could keep out of Lord Talbot's way, perhaps she could show him that her methods were sound. Young minds needed air and sunshine, just like trees did, to grow. Lock them away inside without oxygen or light, and you would be sure to squelch any curiosity or love of learning. She would need to tread lightly with Lord Talbot, though. She knew he would be watching her every move.



## Chapter 5

Charles heard yelling outside his study window. He had tried to get back on task after waking up from his strange dreams. He went to the window, growling at the interruption, and opened the pane. Sticking his head out, he saw the boys were high up in one of the ash trees on the far side of the garden. Miss Steele stood beneath the tree, laughing at their antics. Their racket was enough to wake the dead. He could hear something being said about pirates and taking Miss Steele as their prisoner.

"I don't have time for this," he said under his breath. He slammed the window shut and went back to his desk, trying to focus as the ruckus continued for several minutes. He would allow Miss Steele one day to get to know the boys before he would intervene again, but if she disobeyed his orders once more, he would have to sack her. Just that thought put his teeth on edge. He should have vetted her himself to see if she was a satisfactory candidate. How could Mrs Taylor have chosen someone so far off from what he was looking for in a governess?

However, he knew that it would be difficult to find another governess without sending away for one from a different county. None of the other governesses wanted to work with his brothers, having heard the rumours that they were impossible. Somehow, Elisabeth had charmed them into listening to her. If she had been anyone else, Charles was sure that his brothers would have played several cruel pranks on her by now. He supposed it helped that she was beautiful and young.

He heard a crash outside and went back to the window. His heart raced, fearing that Matty had fallen out of the tree. But there he was, still perched in the tree, like an agile monkey. A branch had been thrown down to Miss Steele, and she was now stripping it of its smaller offshoots.

When she finished, she broke it over her knee and handed a piece to each brother. They brandished them like swords and started to duel. A few moments later, he watched her tuck her skirts into her belt and climb to one of the lower branches. Shocked by her unladylike behaviour, he turned away from the scene and began to pace.

This had to be stopped, nipped in the bud. He could not allow such behaviour in his household. He had hired her to bring order, not to be the cause of even more chaos.

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Later that evening, Charles called Elisabeth into the drawing-room, along with Mrs Taylor. Obviously, he had not made himself clear during their initial meeting that morning. He needed her to be completely aware of the ground rules. More importantly, he needed her to follow them, which was still to be seen.

Standing near the hearth, he waited for the ladies to enter and stand before his desk. He did not invite them to sit down.

"I think you must know why I called you in, Miss Steele?"

She glanced at Mrs Taylor and shrugged. "I suppose you'd like to know how my first day was, My Lord, and how the boys are getting along?"

"I saw how the boys are getting along, Miss Steele. The whole neighborhood heard you in the garden this afternoon, no doubt." Her eyes flashed with fire, and his heart skipped a beat. Why did she have

to be so lovely? He gulped and tried to maintain his serious demeanour.

"We were having a lesson in botany, My Lord. I felt the best way to describe photosynthesis was out in the garden."

"It didn't sound like you were having a lesson." He sighed heavily. "I do not need someone who is going to spoil my brothers and indulge their every whim. They need structure and discipline, not games in the garden. Have I made myself quite clear?"

"You have, My Lord." She nodded, lowering her eyes to the carpet.

"Very well. You are dismissed for the evening. See that you heed my instructions in future." He went back around his desk, hearing the door open. When he didn't hear it close, he looked up, startled that Miss Steele remained in her spot. "Yes? Do you have a question?"

"I do, My Lord." She took a step towards the desk. A stray curl escaped from her ribbon and fell around her face. He wondered how it would feel to tuck it back for her. "I wanted to ask about your parents. Matthew told me that you lost your father when he was only a year old."

Charles felt like he had been slapped across the face. She was very bold indeed to ask such a personal question. "That is none of your concern." He turned back to his papers, hoping she would take the hint and leave his office.

"My Lord, if I am to do my job well, I need to know how the boys are

faring mentally. How have they been dealing with the death of the mother?"

He felt the anger rising. "I repeat that this is none of your business. Good night, Miss Steele."

She didn't move. "I meant no offence, My Lord." Her eyes filled with tears. "I know what it is like to lose a parent. I want to help them, not only with their studies but in life. Grief changes a person – the way we see the world and the way we learn."

"I appreciate your concern, Miss Steele. However, I assure you my brothers' mental states are just fine. You concern yourself with their education, and I shall look out for their mental well-being. You are not here to be their friend." He softened, but only slightly. "Really, Miss Steele. You are not making a good first-day impression." His lips turned up in what would have been a smile and then nodded towards the door. "Now, if you will be good enough to excuse me, I have a few things to finish up before I retire."

She lowered her gaze once more. "Of course, My Lord. Good night." She turned and left. He felt inexplicable loneliness as the door closed softly behind her. Had he been too hard on her? What if she were right? Were his brothers suffering, and he was too busy to notice?

He threw down the papers, unable to focus on his task with Miss Steele's words ringing in his head. He decided to leave off work for the night and go up to the boys' room to bid them goodnight. Perhaps he could learn a little more about Miss Steele in the process.

Climbing the stairs, he came to the boys' room and knocked softly. "Come in!" William called, sitting up in bed. Matthew had almost been

asleep, but he perked up when he saw Charles.

"I thought I would come up and wish you goodnight." Charles sat on the edge of Matthew's bed and tousled his hair. "How was your day with the new governess?"

Matthew sat up straight and turned his eyes heavenward. "Thank you for finding a pretty governess this time, brother! She is so smart, and she makes our lessons fun."

"Did you have a lesson today? I heard you out in the garden, and it sounded more like pirating to me." Charles raised an eyebrow, still a little angry at the woman for going against his wishes.

"That was after our lesson. Today we learned that plants breathe in carbon di ... dioxide," Matthew said, searching for the right term. To Charles' surprise, he had actually remembered what Miss Steele had taught them. "And then they breathe out oxygen. And guess what? We breathe in their oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. Miss Steele says we need each other to live."

"That is true." He couldn't help smiling at the way his brother was explaining their lesson to him.

William sat up straighter and joined in the discussion. "Miss Steele also told us that the reason the leaves change and fall off the trees in the autumn is that the trees have to go to sleep and conserve their energy during the snowy months."

"That's true, too." Charles felt a prick of guilt. His brother had

remembered the lesson Miss Steele had taught them. Even more surprising was that they were excited about it. He had never seen them so animated about learning something new. However, he was not sure it would last. What would his brothers do when Miss Steele was no longer a novelty? Could she get them to focus when the weather turned cold, and they were all cooped up inside?

"Well, I am glad to hear that you at least learned something today." Charles pushed Matthew gently back onto his pillow and put a finger over his lips. "Now, I think it's high time you both were in bed. I'm sure Miss Steele will want you both to be in the schoolroom early tomorrow."

William scooted down and lay back on his pillow. "She's the best governess we ever had, Charles. Thank you for finding her."

Charles smiled. "Thank Mrs Taylor for that. She is the one who found her."

"Well, then, we shall have to thank her in the morning, shan't we Matty?" William looked over at his brother, whose eyelids were already drooping with sleep.

Matty mumbled an incoherent reply and turned onto his side. Charles tucked the blankets up around Matthew's chin and stood. "Have a good sleep, Will. See you in the morning."

"See you in the morning." Will turned over as well, facing the wall. Charles took the candle from the bedside and exited the room, keeping the door cracked open. His brothers had caused him no small amount of heartache over the last few months with their wild behaviour. However, he would miss them when they were both away

at school. That got him to thinking about his own future, a family and children of his own.

He decided to retire for the night. For some reason, he stopped by the library before going to his quarters in the west wing. He half expected to see Miss Steele on the ladder, looking for a book to borrow. The room was empty, though. Half-disappointed, he turned away and went to his room without retrieving a book. He was too tired to read and would probably be asleep before his head even hit the pillow. What a day it had been.

His valet was waiting for him when he came through the door. The man had placed his nightclothes over the screen. He helped Charles take off his cufflinks, replacing them as Charles went behind the screen to change. "Have you met Miss Steele yet?"

His valet, Gregson, shook his head. "I have not had the pleasure, although the talk in the kitchen is that she is very beautiful."

Gregson was a youngish man and would have an eye for such things. "Yes." Charles tried not to put too much of his thoughts into his tone. Why was he suddenly fascinated with a governess? He had never given much thought about the people he employed. However, Miss Steele was different. "That will be all, Gregson. Thank you."

Gregson bowed and left the room, the laundry folded over his arm. Charles crawled into bed, staring up at the ceiling. He remembered what it had been like to be William's age. At one time, he had been adventurous and joyful, just like his brothers. But somewhere along the way, it had been squashed out of him. His mother had insisted he use decorum in every circumstance. She had given him little room for imagination as he had grown up.

How different would his life be now if she had encouraged his creativity and imagination? For the hundredth time since her passing, he wondered if he was doing right by his brothers. Turning over on his side, he tried to put the plethora of thoughts swirling in his mind to rest. It was many hours before he was able to fall asleep.



## Chapter 6

Elisabeth left the study, feeling downtrodden and thoroughly chastised. Had she gone too far? After all, Lord Talbot was probably right. She was here to teach the boys, not be their friend and confidant. This was so much different than it had been at the girls' school. Many of the girls knew her, having grown up together.

When her fellow classmates became her pupils, there had to be some separation, of course. However, they had always felt they could come and confide in her. Many of them had cried when she had gone back home. Well, she had cried, too, truth be told.

What was she supposed to do now? She was not used to teaching boys, apart from her own brothers. She wanted to help the Talbot boys, knowing that dealing with the grief of their mother's passing was not something they would get over in a matter of months. Losing a parent as young as they had would have a lasting effect on them. What Lord Talbot didn't seem to understand was that his brothers needed love and understanding more than they needed a strict schedule.

At least she and her siblings still had their mother. The Talbot boys were orphans. She could not imagine what they were going through, having lost both of their parents so young. Perhaps Charles hadn't even fully realized what state his brothers were in. He had been able to grow up with his parents there to nurture him. Now he was all they had left, and he did not seem to be involved in their lives beyond meals and tea time.

She retired to her room, having already tucked the boys into bed for the night. They had listened in rapture as she had read a bedtime story to them. Apparently, none of their other governesses had

bothered to read to them for enjoyment.

Her room was chilly when she arrived. She lit a candle and changed into her nightdress quickly, nestling under the covers to get warm. However, sleep was long in coming. She tossed and turned for a while. "It's no use," she grumbled. She got up and lit a candle, deciding that she should write to her mother and Harriet to let them know how her first day had gone.

Sitting down at the tiny writing desk, she rummaged around and found an ink well, quill, and a small stack of paper, presumably left by the old governess. She sharpened the quill and sat down to write a letter to her mother first.

*Dearest Mother,*

*I arrived at my post safely and have started to settle in. My new charges are dear boys, so curious and eager to learn. I miss you all so much already. Give Tom and the rest of the children my love. Know that I think of you with the fondest regard and hope that the time will travel quickly until we see each other again. I am enclosing a letter for Harriet if you would be good enough to see it gets to her.*

*With love,  
Elisabeth*

She blotted the letter, drying the ink, and set it aside. Harriet's message would be more in-depth, as they told each other everything.

*Dear Harriet,*

*Here I am in Hensol Manor, and I have never felt so alone. Not even when I left home for the girls' seminary. I miss you already, but I am determined to stay in good spirits. I adore my new charges and would be perfectly happy if not for Lord Talbot's interference.*

*The master of the house is a sour, serious sort of man who insists on squashing any joviality. He puts unrealistic expectations on his young brothers, seemingly determined to squash any enjoyment out of their lives. This new position will be a challenge. But I am determined to rise to it.*

*Please do not share this letter with Mama. I know that she would worry, and I do not wish to add to her anxieties. She has enough to worry about with the younger children. I am glad to do my part to ease our family's discomfort. Pray for me, dear Harriet. I feel your absence worst of all, and I shall miss being able to talk to you whenever either of us is troubled. Please write to me often, as your words will brighten my days and give me fortitude in the weeks and months ahead.*

*Your loving sister,  
Elisabeth*

She blotted the second letter and folded it. She then placed it in the centre of the letter to her mother and folded it. Her mother was a woman of scruples and would not read their private correspondence.

Before she had finished, a knock sounded on the door, making Elisabeth jump. "One moment, please," she called. She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and padded over to the door. Opening it hesitantly, she was pleasantly surprised to see Mrs Taylor greeting her with a tea tray.

"I thought you might enjoy a cup of tea and a chat. I know today was probably not what you had expected." She held the tray up slightly. "May I come in?"

Elisabeth opened the door wide and nodded her head. "Of course, please forgive my rudeness. Come in."

Mrs Taylor came in and set the tea tray on the corner of the writing desk. "Writing to your family, I presume?"

"Yes." Elisabeth smoothed her hair, knowing that it must look a mess after tossing and turning for the short time she had been in bed. Mrs Taylor smiled.

"I remember the first time I left home. I was terrified and homesick for the longest time."

"Have you always been with the Talbots?"

"No. I started as a housemaid for Lord Winters in the next county over. I started when I was fourteen and worked my way up from a housemaid to where I am today."

Elisabeth longed to ask her about marriage but decided to leave off. She took a sip of her tea and sighed. "This was nice of you." She held up the teacup as if to toast her.

"It was my pleasure." Mrs Taylor sipped her tea and settled back in the chair at the writing desk. "May I ask how you came to be a governess? I know your father passed a few years ago. I'm sorry about that."

"Thank you. I had a job at the girls' seminary, where I came up. But after Father died, Mother found everything too much to handle on her own."

"May I ask what profession your father was in?"

"He was a barrister. You would think he would have left us some kind of sum to get by in case of his passing. But after we paid the doctors and the church for his plot, there was hardly enough left to live on. Mother has been taking in washing to help make ends meet."

"And that's why you had to take a job as a governess. What was his illness?"

Elisabeth's eyes filled with tears.

Mrs Taylor leaned forward and patted her hand. "I'm sorry; I do not mean to pry. You do not have to feel obligated to tell me."

"No, it's alright. He had cancer in his pancreas. The doctors tried several procedures to try and cut out the tumours, but nothing worked in the end. And their services were costly. I should have had a dowry set by. All my sisters and I should have. But every last penny went to pay the doctors and, later, to cover the monthly bills. I don't know what we would do if I hadn't found this position." Elisabeth's voice

trailed off. She needed to do everything in her power to keep her place.

Mrs Taylor patted her hand again. "You are a very brave young woman. Not many would have the fortitude to lower themselves to the stature of a governess."

"I'm not brave. I'm desperate. That is hardly the same thing." She took another sip of tea, which was rapidly cooling in the chilly room. "Still, I enjoy teaching. William and Matthew are dear boys."

"I am glad that has been your experience with them. They have not been kind to the last three governesses."

"I heard they like to pull pranks. I assumed that they were harmless jokes, though."

"Hardly. They poured ink in the last governess' tea. She had black teeth for a week, poor thing. She lasted only a month."

"A month? My goodness. She must not have had a good sense of humour."

Mrs Taylor laughed, "No, she did not. She was used to teaching girls and often talked of them. She'd been with them ever since they were born."

"Why did she leave if she liked it there so much?"

"The girls all grew up and married. They had no use for a governess anymore." Mrs Taylor finished her tea and replaced her cup on the tray. "It is the fate of many governesses. I have heard of several who grow content with their families, almost becoming like an honorary aunt. However, children always grow up, and governesses rarely make enough to set aside for their future lives."

Elisabeth's stomach sank. She had never thought this would be a long-term solution to their problem. Perhaps someday she would find a husband, along with Harriet and her younger sisters. Her mother could come to live with her in her old age.

But how would she find a husband, shut away in Hensol Manor? The loneliness of her situation hit her again in its full force. She took her meals alone. Her sitting room was the schoolroom, and she only had one half-day off every two weeks. She certainly would not make enough to set aside for retirement; everything she did make would have to go back to her mother.

Mrs Taylor patted her hand again. "I know what you are thinking. But do not lose hope. What you are experiencing is a combination of homesickness and overwhelm, am I correct?"

"Yes. I miss my sister most of all. I know it sounds silly for a twenty-three-year-old woman to say, but it is true."

"Not at all. There is no shame in missing home. It means that you have had a happy upbringing. Many would envy you that. I know I would."

Elisabeth smiled. "Thank you for that. And thank you for coming up to chat with me. I was not sure if you liked me when we met this morning."

"I was doing my job. I hope we may be friends, Miss Steele. The housekeeper I worked under in my first house did this very thing for me. She found me crying in the pantry, and when I went up for bed, she brought me a cup of tea."

"I would think you had plenty of friends here in the other staff already." Elisabeth set her empty cup down on the tray.

"Most of them are afraid of me. I do demand excellence from them. I do not tolerate laziness or sloppiness. I suppose that leaves little room for friendship." Mrs Taylor stood and took up the tray. "It can be a lonely life we lead, you and I. Perhaps we can ease each other's burdens now and again."

"I would like that. Thank you, Mrs Taylor. You've been very kind to me and made me feel welcome."

"It was my pleasure. Get some sleep now. Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

"Good night," Elisabeth said, standing next to the door.

"Good night."

She closed the door, smiling to herself. Perhaps this day had not turned out so badly after all. At least she had found one friend. She nestled down in the covers, feeling warmer for the friendship she had



found in Mrs Taylor. Blowing out the candle, she lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes. She had not realized how tired she was until that moment. She soon drifted off to sleep and dreamt of Lord Talbot, his eyes at once severe and mesmerizing.

## Chapter 7

"More coffee," Charles said, motioning for the butler. He sipped the dark, aromatic liquid hoping that it would bolster him for the coming day.

He had not slept well the night before, tossing and turning for worry over his brothers. What had Mrs Taylor been thinking to hire a governess such as Miss Steele? She hardly looked menacing as a governess should. A proper governess should strike fear into her pupils just by one withering look. He doubted Miss Steele even had a withering look.

Charles was determined not to be sidetracked by the irritating and beguiling young woman. He had other things to worry about.

"A letter for you, My Lord." The butler took the letter from the footman who had received it, setting it on the table beside his plate.

"Thank you." Opening the seal, Charles perused the letter as he finished his last mouthful of breakfast.

*My Dear Lord Talbot,*

*I am sorry it has been so long since my last letter, but I hope this finds you well. Father has bid me invite you to the London house for dinner when you are next in town. Mother is very eager to see you, as are we all since she missed seeing you on your last visit.*

*As always, we pray that Masters William and Matthew are doing well and hope to see you soon.*

*With fondest regards,  
Lady Amelia Wilmouth*

He smiled at the short note, thinking how ironic it was that he had just been thinking of Lady Amelia. She had much been on his mind of late, his mother's dying charge that he quickly find a wife ringing in his ears.

The Wilmouths and Talbots had long been friends, predating his grandfather's time. Charles' and Amelia's mothers had planned their union from infancy. There was no reason that he shouldn't be just as happy with Amelia as any other debutante. She was beautiful, to be sure, and came from a long line of brothers. Her mother had always assured him that she was guaranteed to give him sons should they wed.

That was what he needed; a son to carry on the Talbot line. He had never had second thoughts about marrying Lady Amelia. However, when he thought of marriage now, it was not her face that appeared in his mind's eye, but Miss Steele's.

Agitated, he wiped his mouth and threw his crumpled napkin on the table next to his plate. He walked to the study, meaning to start his day. The note from Amelia weighed heavily on his hand. He should write her an answer as soon as possible. There was some business in London he had to tend to in a few days, anyway.

He took out a piece of paper and started to craft a response, but the words would not come. He had never had trouble writing to Amelia. Their relationship had always been relaxed. She had become quite the lady after coming out of finishing school, much like her peers. Something about her refined manner made him believe she was hiding her real character from him. He supposed that most ladies were like that. Why was he suddenly questioning his decision to marry Amelia?

He stood, knowing that he would not be able to focus. Deciding that a stroll was in order, he walked out into the hall and proceeded into the garden. The sunshine felt good on his face, and he breathed deeply of the fresh air. It had been a long time since he'd gone for a morning walk. Burying himself in his work had become routine.

Perhaps he was allowing it to control his life a little too much. The pressure of running the estate had been his excuse. However, deep down, he knew that it was what he did to deal with his grief. Despite his mother's flaws, he missed her terribly.

Miss Steele's words came flooding back to him from the evening before. What if his brothers were not alright? If Charles was finding it difficult to cope at times, he could only imagine what his brothers were going through.

He could hear voices floating to him on the breeze, coming from the far corner of the garden. Curious, he bounded down the patio steps and started towards the noise. He rounded the corner of a tall hedgerow and spotted the boys sitting under a tree with Miss Steele. They had spread out a blanket, laying a large book out in front of them.

"Captain Talbot, how are we supposed to find South America if you do not have proper knowledge of the world map? Really, I would have thought they had taught that to you in captaining school."

Matthew laughed and hid his face. "Captaining isn't a word!"

"Is it not? How do you know?" Miss Steele raised an eyebrow. Charles waited to see what she would do next, his curiosity getting the better of him. She had rolled and tied a handkerchief round her head, pulling it down so that it covered her right eye. He surmised that they were playing pirates again.

"I know because it is not in the dictionary," William interjected, backing Matthew.

Miss Steele conceded with a smile. "Well, I stand corrected. If you have read the whole dictionary, you just know every word that ever was in existence."

The boys giggled again and turned their attention back to the map. Matthew pointed to South America. "Here it is, Miss Steele."

"You are most certainly correct, First Mate Matty. Now that we know where South America is, we can hoist the sails. Right, Captain?"

"Right. Since we'll be sailing for some weeks, we need to stop at the next port and load up with supplies. We'll need plenty of citrus, so the men don't get scurvy, and we'll need to buy some things to trade with the locals. I hear they are quite vicious." William turned around on the blanket and pretended to take a giant wheel in hand, steering the ship.

"What can I do?" Matty started to whine. "I wanted to steer the ship."

"You are the navigator, Matty. Now, which direction will we need to travel to get to South America?" Miss Steele pointed at the atlas and waited for Matty to reply. He leaned down, lying flat on his belly before the book, and studied it.

"First, we must travel west a bit and then south over the At ... Atl ..."

"Sound it out," Miss Steele prompted. Charles took a few steps closer, momentarily forgetting himself as he too became caught up in the game she had created.

"At-lan-tic," Matty sounded it out ... "Atlantic!" He beamed up at Miss Steele.

"Well done, Matty."

"First Mate Matty," William corrected.

"I beg your pardon," Miss Steele said with a smile. "Now, shall we head to South America now, or would you like to have one last dinner with your brother before setting off for the wild?"

Matthew thought for a moment, pondering with his fingers resting on his chin. "Charles will miss us very much, won't he?"

William shook his head. "I doubt he will even notice we are gone. Besides, he is much too busy with the estate. Perhaps if we find mountains of gold in the new world, we can help him with the things that need fixing, like all those tenant roofs."

Charles felt a prick of guilt at his brother's comment. He knew he had been a bit neglectful of late. Will always put a brave face on in front of him, but he needed as much attention as other children. He had not been fair to Matty and Will.

"You are very good to want to help your brother, Captain Will. However, I am sure you are mistaken when you say that Lord Talbot would not miss you. I can see he cares for you very much. You know he wants the best for you, don't you?" Miss Steele placed a hand on Will's shoulder in a motherly gesture. Will leaned into her, laying his head on her shoulder.

"I miss him sometimes, but we try not to bother him. He is the best brother one could ask for."

Charles smiled at this. Perhaps he wasn't as much of a failure as he thought he was. Matty piped up again, growing excited, "We should ask Charles if he wants to come with us to South America! He can hunt one of those great spotted cats!"

Matty stood up and started walking around the blanket, holding up his arms as if shouldering a gun. "We can all stalk through the jungle and explore the wilds together! You can come, too, Miss Steele, even though you are a girl."

Miss Steele laughed, and Charles couldn't help joining in quietly.

"Thank you, First Mate Matty. Now, let us sail this ship up to the classroom. It is time we worked on our arithmetic."

Matty and Will groaned. "Do we have to? It is so lovely outside." William covered his eyes with the crook of his arm.

"Now, Captain Will. You are not being a good example for the men. How will they follow you all the way to South America and into the jungle if you will not even lead them back to the classroom?" Miss Steele stood and motioned them to get off the blanket. "Take that corner and help me fold the blanket, please, Will. And Matty, you take the atlas. Good chap."

Matty and Will did as she said without any further complaints. Charles was shocked. He imagined they would have thrown a tantrum with any of their previous governesses. Or simply run away and hidden elsewhere in the garden. They had been known to do such things in the past.

Charles walked away as he heard them coming around the hedgerow. He sneaked over to the patio and went to the door, opening it and then walking back out to make it look like he had been inside all along. He waved as Miss Steele and the boys approached the patio steps.

"Good morning, boys. Miss Steele. Is it time for a break already?"

"We were planning our voyage to South America!" Matty ran to Charles and took his hand. "Will you come with us, Charles? Oh, please say you will!" Matty exclaimed. "We thought you might like to take us on a hunt of one of those big cats that live in the jungle."



"Is that so? And what are those great cats called?"

"Jaguars," William answered for his brother. "Miss Steele says they prowl around in the ruins of ancient civilizations. We understand if you are too busy. But may we take Miss Steele along with us?"

Charles glanced at Miss Steele and saw the colour rising in her cheeks. "If Miss Steele is going, then I suppose I shall have to go, too." He walked down the patio steps, keeping his gaze locked on hers the whole while. "Who will speak with the natives, after all?"

"You speak South Americanese?" Will's eyes grew large, drawing a laugh from the adults.

"Now, Will, you know there is no such language. Most of the people in South America speak Spanish or Portuguese. However, there are several other languages that the natives speak." Miss Steele took a deep breath and started to usher the boys away. "Now, let us not keep you, Lord Talbot. We were on our way back up to the schoolroom to start on the math lesson."

"Not at all. I was coming out to the garden to clear my head." He knelt in front of the boys and took their hands. "You are never a bother to me – do you understand?"

The boys nodded, and Miss Steele smiled. He let them pass and go into the house, watching as Miss Steele opened the door for them. She turned slightly as they went inside, giving him a bewitching smile.

The butler came out as they were going inside. "I'm sorry to disturb you, My Lord, but this just arrived for you from London."

Charles opened the missive and scanned it quickly. "Thank you. Please send my valet up to my room. I must away to London as soon as possible."

"I hope nothing is amiss, My Lord?"

"No, it is just business, but time is of the essence."

## Chapter 8

When Elisabeth woke the next morning, the sky was still dark. She dressed quickly and went downstairs to have a light breakfast before going to wake up the boys. Mrs Taylor met her with a smile in the kitchen and pulled her aside.

"How are you settling in?"

"Just fine, thank you," she replied and went to sit at the table with the other household servants. Mrs Taylor stopped her.

"I'm sorry, dear, but the governess always eats up in the schoolroom. I'll have one of the girls bring you your tray."

"Oh, of course." Elisabeth turned away from the servants' dining area. "I didn't mean to interrupt ..."

"Nonsense. I'll have your breakfast brought up straight away. Do you prefer coffee or tea in the morning?"

"Ahh, tea, please. Thank you." She climbed the stairs and made her way up to the schoolroom. She was so used to taking her meals with her family, everyone talking over each other and laughing. It would take some getting used to if she were expected to have all her meals alone.

Sighing, she opened the schoolroom door and decided to get the arithmetic lesson up on the board while waiting for her breakfast. She took up the chalk and began writing sums on the board, trying not to give in to her homesickness. She thought of Harriet. She would be walking to school by now.

A knock sounded on the door, and Elisabeth turned, expecting to see a maid. However, Mrs Taylor appeared carrying the tray. "I thought I'd come up and see if you're alright. I didn't mean to make you feel unwelcome downstairs."

Elisabeth smiled, appreciating the sentiment. "No, not at all. I must get used to taking meals alone, that's all. I have to get used to doing a lot of things alone, I suppose."

"Yes, well, it can be a lonely life. It is good that you have family close by. Will you be going to visit them on your half-days?"

"Yes, of course. It is only a few miles away. I suppose I will not be able to walk as much in the winter, but I'll manage."

Mrs Taylor laid the tray on the desk and straightened, smoothing her skirts. "Your family will be happy to see you whenever you can get away, I'm sure." She brushed her hands off and smiled at Elisabeth. "Enjoy your breakfast. You can ring when you are finished, and one of the girls will come and fetch the tray."

"Thank you," Elisabeth said as Mrs Taylor left the room. She sat down at the desk and started on the simple meal of tea, hot gruel, and toast. She ate quickly, eager to get on with her day. The boys would no doubt be finished with breakfast around the same time as her, and they could get started with their lessons.

When she had finished, she went out into the hall and knocked on the boys' bedroom door. She peeked her head inside to see that they were both still asleep. She clicked her tongue and went in. Opening the curtains, she turned around, clicking her tongue again. "Now, boys. Don't tell me that you're going to sleep the whole day away?" She clapped her hands, and Matthew's eyes opened slowly. He smiled when he saw her and sat up, stretching his arms above his head.

"Good morning, Miss Steele," he said sleepily.

"Good morning, Master Matthew. How did you sleep?"

"I slept well, thank you."

She sat down at the edge of the bed and tousled his hair. "Why don't you get up and get dressed while I try to wake William. Does he usually have a hard time getting up in the morning?"

"Sometimes." Matthew rolled his eyes. "Mama used to call him Grumpy Bear in the morning."

Elisabeth laughed softly. "Oh, dear. Well, I shall be careful not to upset the Sleeping Bear." She went over to William's bed and touched his shoulder, shaking gently. "Will? It's time to wake up."

He groaned and tried to cover his head with a pillow. "Not now."

Elisabeth took the pillow away and brushed her hand over his forehead. "Come now, Will. I need you to wake up. We are going on an adventure."

Will slowly opened his eyes. "An adventure? Where?"

"I love adventures," Matthew chimed in from behind the screen. He walked out with a pair of brown breeches on, pulling his shirt over his head as best he could.

"Have you ever been to South America?" Elisabeth watched as the boys exchanged a glance, their eyes lighting up.

"Are we going all the way to South America today?"

"Yes," Elisabeth answered. "But, of course, we can't leave until Will gets out of that bed and gets dressed." She patted the sheets where his legs were, spurring him into action. "I'll wait in the schoolroom, and then we shall have breakfast together."

Will got out of bed and started to dress as she left, overhearing their chatter as she went. "I shall like eating our meals with Miss Steele. Not like all the other terrible governesses. I bet she will let us talk."

She smiled at this and went back to the classroom. She went to the small bookshelf in the corner of the room and picked out a history book. Flipping through a few of the pages, she selected the passages she wanted to cover later that afternoon. She did the same with an

English primer. She still did not know exactly where she would need to begin with the boys' lessons. Perhaps she should write an exam to see where they were in the studies.

Walking back over to the desk, she started to construct a series of questions to help her see where their knowledge lay and what they needed to focus on.

The boys soon rejoined her, sitting at the small table near the window where they would take their meals together. "Are we off to South America now?" Matthew asked excitedly.

"Not yet, Master Matthew. Every voyage should start with a hearty meal. We do not know when we will get to eat again, you know, since we are off to the wilds of South America."

"That is true," William said and tucked into his breakfast. Matthew followed suit, and Elisabeth sat at the head of the table. They all ate quickly and were soon finished. Elisabeth stacked the plates and utensils in preparation for the maid to come and collect them.

"Now may we go to South America?" Matthew asked, jumping down from his seat.

"Yes. Come with me. But we must be quiet. William, grab that blanket there. Come along, Matthew." Elisabeth took his hand and put a finger to her lips. "We must be very quiet; there are jaguars in these jungles."

She opened the door to the schoolroom and looked out, turning her head, first to the right and then to the left. She wanted to make sure

that Lord Talbot was not coming. She felt a little guilty at going against his wishes that she be strict with her schedule. However, yesterday had shown her that the boys responded well to being outdoors, using nature to teach them in her lessons.

She turned back around and nodded that the coast was clear. "Alright, let's go," she whispered. The boys giggled, having fun with the make-believe trek through the jungle. They walked out to the garden and found the perfect spot nestled behind the hedgerow. The flowers were all in bloom, scenting the air with their aromatic petals.

Elisabeth took the blanket, spread it over the grass, and then took the atlas and spread it open on the ground. "Now, can either of you tell me where South America is on this map?"

She pushed it over to them so they could share. They looked for several seconds, William finally pointing to South America. "There it is!"

"Well done, William. I shall make you captain for this voyage. Matty, can you tell me how many countries make up the continent of South America?"

Matthew gave her a confused look, not understanding how he was supposed to know that. She scooted over to his side and put her arm around his shoulders. "Here," she pointed. "This whole land mass is South America. But see all the black lines? These are the borders of the different countries that make up the continent. Understand?"

"I think so," Matthew replied.

"Good, now all you have to do is count the different countries." She helped him count them, and when they were finished, he looked up at



her and answered, "Fourteen?"

"Correct. Today, I thought we would explore the country of Peru." The boys repeated after her, and she turned to the pages in the history book she had found. "In 1532, Francisco Pizzaro marched on Peru ..."

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Elisabeth could have sworn her heart stopped when she saw Lord Talbot standing on the patio. She immediately felt guilt wash over her, thinking that he was about to reprimand her for bringing the boys outside for their geography lesson. Instead, he greeted his brothers warmly and even had a smile for her.

"If Miss Steele is going to South America, I suppose I shall have to come along, too."

She could not be sure why, but she felt a blush rise in her cheeks. Warmth spread through her body, and she looked away. He looked handsome in his grey, tailored suit. She tried to keep her focus so she would not embarrass herself.

"We were just heading up to the classroom to begin our arithmetic lesson." Her voice quavered as she said the words. She hurried the boys away, hoping to put some distance between herself and her distracting employer.

They made their way to the classroom, and they started on their sums. The boys copied down the problems on their slates and made some excellent headway when Lord Talbot knocked on the door. "May I come in?"

She stood and met him at the door. "Of course, Lord Talbot. Please come in."

The boys put down their slates, wondering at their brother coming to see them so shortly after their encounter in the garden. "I apologize for the interruption. I only wanted to come in and let the boys know that I will be leaving for London this evening."

"Are you going to see Lady Amelia?" William asked.

William's question piqued Elisabeth's interest. Who was Lady Amelia?

Lord Talbot gave her a strange look and knelt in front of William. "I will see her, but that is not the reason for my journey. I have some business that needs tending and will be away for a few weeks."

"A few weeks? Why so long?" It was apparent from William's question that he did not like the idea of his brother being away for so long.

"The Season has started, and there are many hands to shake. I am counting on you to look after the manor. Can I count on you?"

William brightened at this. "You can count on me!" He saluted as if he were a soldier and went back to his desk to continue working on his sums. Matthew gave him a quick hug, wrapping his little arms around Charles' neck. "Bring me back some sweets," he whispered.

Elisabeth smiled at the exchange.

"I shall do what I can." Charles gave him a gentle push back to his desk. He straightened and gave her a quizzical look. "I wonder if I might beg an audience when you have finished with the boys' lessons for the day?"

Elisabeth was thrown off by his request, wondering if she had a reprimand coming. "Of course, My Lord. We are nearly finished with the arithmetic. I could come down while the boys have their luncheon?"

"Very well. Thank you, Miss Steele. Carry on," Lord Talbot said and strode out of the room. She stood motionless for a moment, afraid that he was angry at her for taking them out into the garden again. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was not going to worry about that now, needing to focus on the boys to make sure they understood their sums.

"Miss Steele? May we go outside again when Charles leaves? It looks like the perfect day for sailing." Matthew looked longingly out the window at the sunshine playing in the leaves of the great oak trees.

"Perhaps." Elisabeth did not want to risk being caught by Lord Talbot again. At least with his departure, she felt she would have a bit more freedom when conducting their lessons.

## Chapter 9

"Come in!" Charles called when the knock came at the study door. He stood as Elisabeth and Mrs Taylor entered the room. "Thank you for coming, Mrs Taylor. Please have a seat, ladies."

Elisabeth looked nervous, and so she should. Mrs Taylor glanced at her, knowing that this would not be pretty if she decided to argue.

"I saw you out in the garden today," he began, watching for her reaction. She winced and met his gaze, looking like a naughty child who had raided the biscuit jar.

"Yes, My Lord, you did. We were having our geography lesson in the garden," she admitted. She folded her hands in her lap and waited for him to go on without further explanation.

"I know you have only been here for a day; thus, I have been lenient. I am not convinced that your methods are sufficient when teaching boys, as I know your experience thus far has only been in teaching girls."

"My teaching methods work for boys and girls alike, Lord Talbot. The male mind is not superior to a woman's. We are simply not offered the same opportunities." She did not look away as she said this, her eyes flashing with indignation. He raised an eyebrow, trying to decide whether to admire her or be offended by her remarks.

"I did not call you here to have a debate about the discrepancies that

plague our society. I have already laid out how I want my brothers to be educated, and it seems that you have done nothing to heed my wishes."

"I apologize if it seems so, My Lord. I will need some time to get acquainted with where they are in their studies. That is all I was trying to determine this morning, and I thought that being out in the sunshine might help the boys focus." Elisabeth calmed down, but he could see that her hands were clenched in tight fists on her lap.

"I can understand that, Miss Steele. That is why I did not rush in and reprimand you this morning when I overheard you giving your lesson." Charles watched her face turn red with this revelation. She repositioned herself in the chair and glanced over at Mrs Taylor before she answered.

"You were spying on us?" she asked, something akin to betrayal flooding her eyes. He could see that she was embarrassed at his revelation. However, her outburst was uncalled for. She was forgetting her place.

Mrs Taylor spoke up at this accusation. "This is Lord Talbot's house, Miss Steele. If he found you out in the garden, he was not spying; he was simply going where he would on his own property. You would do well to remember that." She gave a stern look, putting Miss Steele back in her place.

Miss Steele's eyes filled with tears at this soft rebuke. "I apologize, My Lord. I meant no disrespect."

"Very well. I want to hear that my brothers are progressing in their lessons when I return." Charles sat back, making a steeple of his

hands.

Elisabeth nodded. "Yes, My Lord. I assure you that I will take the greatest care with Masters William and Matthew."

"See that you do. I am instructing Mrs Taylor to check in on you from time to time to be sure that my instructions are carried out." He sat up straighter and walked them to the door. "Good afternoon, Miss Steele."

She kept her eyes lowered to the floor as she exited. "Good night, My Lord," she mumbled.

He motioned for Mrs Taylor to stay for a moment, waiting until Elisabeth was out of earshot. "How do you think she is doing so far?"

"I think she is settling in, My Lord. It takes time for a new governess to get the hang of things, especially a new governess at her first post. I shall keep an eye on her and the boys while you are away."

"Thank you. I would appreciate a full report when I return."

"Of course, My Lord."

"Thank you, Mrs Taylor. Good night to you." He opened the door wide for her and then closed it, going back to his desk. He pulled out a piece of paper and quill. His trunks were ready to go. The last thing he needed to do before he left was answer Lady Amelia's letter.

*Dear Lady Amelia,*

*Fortune has smiled on us, as I will be travelling to London this afternoon. I apologize that I will not give you more warning, as my letter will most likely arrive after I do. Urgent business calls me to town earlier than I had expected. Please tell your father that I would be happy to dine with you and your family whenever convenient.*

*I look forward to seeing you all and hope that this letter finds you well.*

*Sincerely,  
Lord Talbot*

Charles blotted the letter and sealed it, leaving it in the tray for the butler to pick up when he went around to collect the post. Standing, he left the study and went to change into his travelling clothes. Miss Steele's fiery comments were still ringing in his ears. He wondered if she had capitulated simply to pacify him or if she would actually heed his instructions. He sighed. There was nothing he could do about it now. Mrs Taylor would keep her in line, just as she had in the study.

When he came downstairs, Mrs Taylor and the butler were waiting to see him off. He gave a few instructions to the butler and then turned to Mrs Taylor.

"Walk with me," he said, heading out the front door. She followed him out into the sunshine, long shadows starting to creep along the ground as the sun set. "I hope Miss Steele understands the seriousness of our discussion. I don't want to return home to find out that she has indulged the boys in their whims."

Mrs Taylor sighed. "She is young, My Lord. I do apologize for her outburst in the study. She seems to feel things very passionately."

"I understand. I do not wish to quench her spirit. But one can have too much passion, I suppose. Please keep a close eye on her and the boys. I don't want her ruining them with radical ideas."

"I don't think she would feed her ideas to the boys, but I assure you I will watch her. She is young, My Lord, and has not become accustomed to the ways of the world."

Charles nodded. "Indeed. She will have to learn fast if she is to remain in my household, though."

Distress filled Mrs Taylor's eyes. He could see that she and Miss Steele had formed a budding friendship over the last couple of days. "Do not worry, Mrs Taylor, I hardly think it will come to me having to dismiss the young woman. She will do well with you as her teacher. Goodbye now, and good luck while I'm gone."

This seemed to allay her disquiet. "Of course, sir. You may rest assured that all will be taken care of in your absence. Safe journey."

Nodding, he climbed into the carriage and settled down in his seat. He glanced up at the schoolroom window. He could see Miss Steele and the boys watching as he drove away, dust kicking up behind the carriage. For some strange reason, he thought he would miss seeing Elisabeth, even though she was impertinent at times.

He settled back in the seat, preparing for the long journey ahead.



Watching the lovely green landscape as he passed, he tried to relax. London was not his favourite place to go, but business often called him there. It was too loud and dirty and crowded. Amelia, on the other hand, loved the city. It was true that London afforded the best restaurants, theatres, and parties. However, Charles much preferred the quietness of home. He had a feeling that if he and Amelia married, he would find himself in London more often. It was something he would just have to get used to.

Even more strange would be sending William and Matthew away to school. The house would be much too quiet without them, and it was something he had avoided even thinking about until now. Of course, he could not keep them at home forever. Miss Steele would hardly have the knowledge to teach them everything they would be expected to learn.

She was mistaken in thinking that teaching boys and girls required the same knowledge and skill set. Women were expected to learn a whole different skill set than men. Men and women had different functions, and thus they must be taught differently.

She had been right about one thing, though. William and Matthew had enjoyed her little exploration of the garden. He had never seen them so well-behaved with a governess since their mother had died. He had to wonder if it was because she was beautiful and younger than the others had been. She treated them as if she were their older sister rather than their governess. That fact both worried and intrigued him, especially on William's account. He did not usually take easily to strangers. However, he had warmed to Miss Steele so quickly.

Closing his eyes, he started to dose with the steady bump back and forth of the carriage. He was determined to put the beautiful Miss Steele out of his mind. He needed to focus on this trip and plan for his time with Amelia. Perhaps he would even come back to Hensol with a fiancée by the end of the trip.

## Chapter 10

Elisabeth woke up the next day like a weight had been lifted off of her chest. With Lord Hensol gone, she felt that she and the boys would have some room to breathe and relax. Despite his warnings that she should teach them the way he wanted, she had decided to keep doing it her own way.

The boys seemed to be picking up on everything she taught with ease, soaking up her words like little sponges. If she could show him that her methods really did work, perhaps he would come around and allow her to keep teaching as she saw fit.

Later that afternoon, Mrs Taylor came to the classroom as Elisabeth was setting the boys to work writing their own stories. William wrote as Matthew narrated. William chimed in on elements he thought should be in the plot as they went. Elisabeth greeted Mrs Taylor, smiling as she looked at the boys in shock. Elisabeth gave a soft laugh. "What is it?"

"I am at a loss, Miss Steele. Are these the same boys I was teaching only a few days ago?"

Elisabeth crossed her arms, pride swelling in her chest. "Are they very different?" She had not seen how they were before she came, only heard stories.

"You can't know how different, Miss Steele. Have you placed a spell on them?" Mrs Taylor teased. "Their moods have improved so much in the last couple of days. You have made learning fun for them."

"If only Lord Hensol would see it." She walked over to the boys to see how they were doing. Mrs Taylor followed.

She lowered her voice so that the boys would not overhear. "I know Lord Hensol can seem like a cold and exacting master. But everything he does is for the well-being of his brothers. He works so hard to be sure their future is secure. He has been under tremendous strain since his father died, and it has only increased since his mother's death."

Elisabeth let out a sigh and motioned her towards the desk and away from the boys. "I understand all of that, and I respect it. However, he doesn't seem to understand how children respond to different teaching methods. For some, sitting at a desk all day, writing and reading is not a problem. But – others – need to have more hands-on activities. William and Matthew are brilliant boys, but they are also very creative and imaginative. They need to be allowed to explore that creativity." Elisabeth picked up the rest she had created for them. "Did you know they both only missed one question in the examination I gave them?" She handed it to Mrs Taylor, and she scanned the questions.

Looking over William's test, she raised an eyebrow. "There are some very complicated sums on this test for a boy of his age."

"William is brilliant when it comes to numbers. He will do very well when he goes off to conventional school." She then showed her Matthew's test. "Matthew reads very well for a boy of his age. His vocabulary is superb for a boy of six."

Mrs Taylor smiled. "I can see how passionate you are about education. However, you also have a duty to obey your employer. If you continue to disobey him, you won't be here long enough to help the boys

prepare for their enrollment in Eton."

Elisabeth nodded, knowing that what Mrs Taylor said was true. Mrs Taylor patted her on the shoulder. "I'll leave you so you can get back to your lessons. If it's any consolation, I think you are doing a marvellous job."

Smiling, Elisabeth walked her to the door. "Thank you." Approaching the boys still lying on the floor working on their story, she clapped her hands and knelt before them. "Well, now. How is your fairytale coming along?"

Matthew sat up and criss-crossed his legs. "Smashing! We just imprisoned the princess in the dragon cave."

"Is that so? Well, I hope you have a plan to free the fair maiden? But for now, let us leave off writing and go for a walk, shall we?"

William and Matthew sprang up from the floor simultaneously and were at the door before she could blink. Laughing, she followed them, retrieving a book written in French. Matthew took her hand and skipped down the hall by her side, beaming all the while. "Miss Steele? May I ask you something?" Matthew halted suddenly while she and William looked on.

"Yes, of course. What is it, Matthew?"

"I feel good that Charles is not here to interfere with our lessons. Does that make me a very bad boy?"

Elisabeth cocked her head to the side and knelt before him, taking both his little hands in hers. "Oh, Matthew, I do not think you could ever be bad. Not truly. You must understand that your brother wants what is best for you. He wants me to teach you everything you will need to know before you go to Eton. And I want the same for you."

"But he would be angry if he knew we were going outside for a walk, wouldn't he?" William asked, hanging his head.

"If you both would rather stay in the classroom, of course, I am all for that. I only thought it was such a lovely day, and we get so few of them in England. The summer will soon be gone, and then we will be cooped up inside all the time." Elisabeth started back towards the classroom, but both boys jumped to stop her.

"No! We want to go outside." William exchanged a glance with Matthew. "We only thought we should make a pact, not to tell Charles."

Elisabeth chuckled. "That will not be necessary. If he asks us about our lessons while he was away, I hope you will both have lots of information and new knowledge to share with him. He will see that our time has not been wasted. And with that being said, we should go out and have our French lesson. Today we are learning to conjugate some more difficult verbs ..."

William groaned and smashed the palm of his hand against his forehead. Elisabeth gave him a stern look and waved the book above her shoulder. "Now, now. No complaining!" she chided. William cracked a smile and held the door open for them, allowing her and Matthew to walk onto the patio in front of him.

"Very well, Miss Steele. We shall have a good attitude for you. Shan't we, Matthew?"

"Yes, we shall. But only if you promise that we may read our story for you later."

"Of course, you may. I am eager to hear about the maiden locked in the dragon cave."

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"Roar!" William cried, crumpling the pages slightly as he read. He waved his arms as if they were two giant dragon wings and snarled menacingly. After having their luncheon, William and Matthew had insisted that she sit and listen to their story. They brought an adult-sized chair over to the middle of the classroom and made her sit down. Standing before her as if preparing to act out a scene from a play, they began their story with much gusto. *The Unwilling Offering* was turning out to be quite the thriller, Elisabeth thought as she listened. She was amazed once again at the creativity both boys exhibited.

"And then with a mighty roar, the dragon came out of his hiding place behind the rock, sniffing the air as he went ..." William continued.

Matthew put his hand by his mouth and whispered, "That was my bit."

William shushed him and continued, "The fair maiden screamed, and her cries echoed through the cave. The dragon covered his ears and came at her! But when she thought all was lost, he turned into a man to stand before her."

William gave Elisabeth a look that said, "Aren't I clever?" She smiled and sat up straighter, listening for the next twist in the plot.

"How dare you come into my cavern, maiden!" the man bellowed. The girl was so frightened that she nearly fainted. The man grabbed her wrist and made her sit down. 'Who has disturbed my sleep to bring you here?'

The maiden shook her head. 'The village thought to sacrifice me to the dragon. How is it that you have turned into a man?'

William switched from a high-pitched voice when he read the maiden's dialogue and then made his voice go as deep as possible for the dragon-man's part. Elisabeth winked at Matthew as he jumped around from foot to foot, interjecting random sound effects as William read.

When the tale was over, with the maiden and dragon-man getting married, Elisabeth applauded. "That was a wonderful tale you two wrote. I will check the grammar and give my remarks, but as far as creativity, I give the highest marks."

They beamed up at her as they collected the pages to their story and handed them to her. "Do you know who the fair maiden is in the story?" William asked. She raised an eyebrow.

"No. Is this an allegorical story then?" Elisabeth set the pages on her desk. Turning, she saw that they had both screwed up their faces in confused expressions.

"What is an alligator-ical story?" Matthew asked.

"Not alligator, Matthew." She laughed. "*Allegory*. It is an indirect representation or parable. In other words, it is a story that has a deeper meaning, and we as the readers must dig deeper to figure out what the author is really talking about."

"Well, then, yes, it is an allegory, I suppose," William replied matter-of-factly. "You are the maiden in the story, and Charles is the dragon."

Elisabeth became uncomfortable as the boys began their explanation. "Go on," she said warily.

"Well, Charles is the dragon because he is trapped in his work always and has no time for us. The old witch placed a spell on him and told him that if he didn't learn to have fun, she would turn him into a dragon." Matthew sat down at her feet, looking up at her with his innocent eyes as he explained.

"And when the fair maiden comes into the cave, she starts to show him that there is more to life than work. And he falls in love with her and turns back into a man." William finished the explanation, plopping down next to Matthew.

"And I am the one who is going to set the dragon free, as it were?" Elisabeth's heart started pounding, for what reason she did not know. She wanted to shush the boys so that no one would overhear, even though she knew that Lord Hensol was away. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks and decided that was enough of fairytales for the day. "Right, well, I think it is high time we had our arithmetic lesson."



She clapped her hands, and the boys went to their desks, bringing out their slates without a word of argument. While they set to work doing their sums, Elisabeth read their story over again, marking grammatical and spelling errors to go through with them later.

*"Your love has set me free, fair maiden! I thank you ..."* Elisabeth pictured Lord Hensol turning from a dragon back into a man. Her brother's representation of their brother had not been far off from what she had been thinking of him that morning. She let her mind wander, wondering what he was doing in the big city at that moment.

He was most likely sitting locked away in his study, much as he had been at the estate. Did the man ever stop working? It was no wonder why the boys had painted him as a grumpy dragon locked away in a cave. The portrayal made her giggle. What would Lord Hensol be like if he allowed himself to turn back into a man, with a heart of flesh beating in his chest instead of a heart of stone?

## Chapter 11

Charles arrived at the London house late in the evening. After a simple meal of cold meats, cheese, bread, and fruit, he went to bed and slept soundly. It was his first good night's sleep in ages, it seemed. Perhaps he could rest knowing that he would have a respite from his brothers' antics for a while. Whatever the reason, he woke up refreshed and ready to meet a few of his business partners. After his breakfast, he headed off to the club where he would conduct his business.

When he arrived back home late that afternoon, a letter was waiting for him. He thanked his butler as he handed him the missive and went into the study to read it. He recognized Amelia's hand, breaking the seal.

*Dear Lord Hensol,*

*We were overjoyed to receive your letter this morning. Your trip to London has come at a most fortuitous time, as we have been invited to a ball at the Grahams' house this evening. Father wonders if you might like to accompany us if you are not too exhausted from your journey. We await your reply.*

*Sincerely,  
Lady Amelia*

He smiled and folded the letter, sitting down to write an answer. It would be good to get the matter of his betrothal to Lady Amelia underway. There was no use in stalling the inevitable.

He rang for his butler and handed off his answer to Lady Amelia. "And tell my valet to set out my finest suit." The butler went to do his bidding, and Charles went back to work. But all the while, he could not stop his mind from wandering to the simple governess who had taken charge of his brothers at home.

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Charles was greeted at the Graham mansion door later that evening, the house already alight with music and dancing when he arrived. Lady Graham greeted him warmly and gave him a knowing look as she watched him search the faces of those lining the foyer. "She is in the ballroom, My Lord."

He smiled at her. "Thank you, Lady Graham. And may I say that you have outdone yourself yet again?" Lord and Lady Graham were known for throwing the most lavish parties in London.

"Thank you, Lord Hensol. You are most kind." She smiled and turned to another guest who was coming in.

Charles made his way through the maze of people and into the ballroom, searching for Amelia and her parents. He saw her tucked into a corner, talking with her sister as her parents engaged one of Lord Wilmouth's associates. He meandered through the crowd until he got close, and Amelia spotted him. She beamed at him as he approached.

"Lord Hensol. How good it is to see you again," she said, offering him her hand. He bent slightly at the waist and kissed her hand.

"It is always a pleasure, Lady Amelia. And how are you, Lady Genevieve?" He turned to her younger sister, who curtsied and blushed.

"I am very well, thank you, Lord Hensol." Her voice was mousy.

Lord Wilmouth turned then, bringing his wife over to the circle. "Lord Hensol," he said, shaking Charles' hand. "At last, we are all reunited. How long are we to enjoy your company this time?"

"Three weeks," Charles replied. He turned as the musicians started a new dance, and he looked at Amelia. "Shall we dance, Lady Amelia?" He held out his hand, and she gladly accepted.

Leading her out onto the dance floor, she simpered. He had forgotten how strikingly beautiful she was. Of course, she could have grown more lovely in his absence. He had not been to town in many months.

"How are your brothers, Lord Hensol? Dear William and Matthew," she said with a sigh. "I hope they are faring well with everything they have had to endure this last year?"

Charles led her through the dance, holding her close. "They are well; thank you for asking. It has been a hard year for them, but I hope that we may all move on from the heartache soon."

She sighed dramatically, and her eyes filled with tears. "I was so sorry to hear about your mother while we were away on the Continent. You

all must miss her terribly."

Charles nodded. "Indeed." However, death was not something he wanted to discuss at a party. "How was your trip to the Continent?"

Amelia gushed about Paris and Rome, detailing several parts of their journey. Even as she spoke, he had trouble listening, distracted by the intrusion of Miss Steele on his thoughts. He shook his head slightly, willing himself to pay attention. Amelia was beautiful, with raven black hair and dark brown eyes. She was a lady of class, a woman that would make a good wife for him. Even so, he could not help thinking about the governess back home with the bewitching blue eyes ...

"... would not you agree?" Amelia was asking as the dance ended. They bowed and curtsied to each other and then turned to clap the musicians in thanks. He led her off the dance floor, racking his brain for what she had been talking about.

"I do apologize, Lady Amelia, but I did not catch the last thing you said."

"I said, Paris is lovely in the spring, do not you agree?" He could sense that she had an ulterior motive past speaking of the weather in France. Smiling, he decided to feign ignorance of her plot.

"I would indeed. Paris is a lovely city, especially in the spring." Charles allowed the conversation to float around him, giving one-word answers here and there when appropriate. He needed to stop thinking about Miss Steele and focus on Lady Amelia. After all, she was the woman he was planning to marry.

He could not marry a governess. The very thought was ridiculous. Men of his station rarely married for love.

He asked Amelia to dance once more and even asked her sister to dance with him. Lady Genevieve was not as practiced in the art of flirtation as her sister. Still, she would learn in time to give the same practiced smiles and engaging conversation as Lady Amelia. He was sure of that. All young ladies with wealth and titles had to learn the art of 'catching a husband.' There was no other vocation available to women besides being wives and mothers.

As the musicians took a break, Charles saw an opportunity to take Lord Wilmouth aside. They joined several men in the smoking-room as the ladies took time to freshen up.

"I wonder if we might have a private word, Lord Wilmouth?" Charles asked, placing his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Of course, my boy." Lord Wilmouth excused himself from the conversation he had been having with some of the older gentlemen and walked away with Charles.

"I have been giving this much thought over the last few months, sir. I would like to ask your permission to court Lady Amelia."

Lord Wilmouth smiled. "I know this has been a long time in the making, my boy." Charles warmed at the familiar way the older man called him 'my boy.' Lord Wilmouth and his father had been fast friends. He imagined what it would be like to have Lord Wilmouth as his father-in-law and smiled. "Of course, I give my hearty consent."

They shook hands and rejoined the gentlemen. When the ball was drawing to a close, Lord Wilmouth invited Charles back to the house. Lady Amelia brightened at this. Charles was sure she had an inkling of what was coming.

He followed them to their home a few blocks away, rehearsing what he would say to Amelia when they arrived. Lord Wilmouth met him at the door, telling him that Amelia was waiting for him in the parlour with her mother. He cleared his throat and straightened his jacket before going in.

Amelia waited by the hearth, turning as he came in. He could tell she was eager for him to ask his question. He glanced over at her mother, waiting in the corner near the window.

"Well, I suppose you know what I want to ask you."

Smiling, she nodded. "I believe so."

"Well then," he began. "Would you do the honour of allowing me to court you, Lady Amelia?"

Something untold flashed through her eyes, but she quickly covered it. She beamed up at him and took his offered hand. "It would be my pleasure, Lord Hensol."

Her mother came over to her and congratulated them 'in this most important step.' Lord Wilmouth and Lady Genevieve joined them, and

he called for drinks to be served. He raised his glass of champagne when they had all received their glasses. "To Lord Hensol and Amelia. May this be the happy beginnings of a new chapter in your lives."

"Hear, hear!" Charles said and took a sip of the delicious champagne. Lady Amelia blushed prettily. When it was time for him to say goodnight, she walked him to the door, her parents watching dutifully from the parlour doorway.

"I had a lovely time tonight," she said.

"As did I. May I call on you tomorrow afternoon?"

"Of course. You are welcome here anytime, Lord Hensol." She smiled kindly and curtsied.

"Thank you. Good night, Amelia." She blushed again at the familiar use of her given name.

"Good night ... Charles."

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Amelia turned on her father as Charles left, the butler closing the door behind him. "Father! I thought Lord Hensol was going to propose tonight! How could you have got my hopes up like that?" She stalked back into the parlour, growling in a very unladylike manner. It was her mother who came to her side, however.



"Patience, Amelia. This is the natural order of things. You are getting ahead of yourself."

"A girl may hope, I suppose. I wish he would get on with it," Amelia mumbled.

Genevieve came to her side and sat down next to her. "You are so lucky, Amelia," she said sighing. "I wish I had a suitor."

"All in good time, Genevieve. We must all work diligently to see Amelia happily married to the Earl before we can turn our attention to you." Their mother paced in front of them.

"What is there to work diligently at? We have planned this union since they were children. I hardly think Charles will allow anything to come between them. I foresee a quick engagement and shall be surprised if the young ones are not married by Michaelmas," Amelia's father chimed in.

Amelia went to her father, grabbing his hands. "Do you really think so?"

He smiled at her and caressed her cheek. "By all I saw this evening, the man is absolutely smitten with you. You have nothing to fear, my dear."

Amelia squealed with delight and started talking excitedly with Genevieve. "A wedding trip on the Continent!" she gushed. "I can see it now. Paris in the autumn must be just as beautiful as it is in the spring. Can you imagine, Genevieve? I am going to be a lady in my

own right!"

Her mother interjected herself back into the conversation. "You haven't won him yet, no matter what your father says." They watched Lord Wilmouth leave, retiring for the evening. "You must be diligent to win him with your accomplishments and charm. We shall call the seamstress tomorrow and have a few new gowns turned out for you. You must look your best at all times."

Amelia nodded, excited by the idea of getting new clothes. She loved being the centre of attention. "I shall make him fall in love with me. Don't worry, Mother. I'll make you proud."

Her mother nodded, turning the girls towards the stairs. "I know you will. Now, off to bed. You don't want to have ugly dark circles under your eyes when he comes to see you tomorrow."

## Chapter 12

Weeks passed, Elisabeth and the boys basking in the freedom that Charles' absence had given them. "Boys!" she called from a corner of the dusty attic. "I think I found something!"

The boys came rushing to her as she opened a trunk. Sure enough, tucked inside were some old clothes that would do for costumes. Elisabeth had promised them that they could put on a play at some point. But for today, she had another idea. "These will do very nicely for our table etiquette lesson."

She allowed the boys to pick out their suits, no doubt they were old suits of their father's from his younger days. They looked to be the fashion from somewhere in the 1770s.

When each of them had picked an outfit, she dug through the trunk and pulled out a beautiful silver silk gown, glistening with jewels on the neckline. She replaced the magnificent gown, wondering what it had been worn for. She imagined wearing such a dress at a ball, perhaps even meeting the royal family.

Shaking her head at the silly dream, she folded the dress neatly and closed the lid to the trunk. The boys were calling her name from the top of the stairs leading out of the attic. "I'm coming!" she called, brushing her hands of the dust they had collected on their search.

When the boys were dressed and ready in their grown-up suits, Elisabeth took them down to the formal dining room. She rang for the butler and asked him to bring three place settings. He raised an eyebrow, looking as if he would refuse for a moment. Mrs Taylor

appeared at the door at just the right moment.

"It is alright. I've given Miss Elisabeth permission to conduct an etiquette lesson in here."

"His lordship would not appreciate ..."

"Never mind that. Lord Hensol instructed Miss Steele to give the boys a well-rounded education. They need to know these skills." Mrs Taylor asked one of the footmen to get the place settings and prepare the dining room. Elisabeth then took the boys into the drawing room to wait for 'dinner' to be served. When all was ready, the butler came in to announce dinner.

"Now, William, since you are the oldest, you would offer me your arm and escort me into dinner."

William stuck out his elbow, and Elisabeth took his arm. Matthew followed behind them, whining that he wanted to be the oldest next time to escort Miss Steele. Giggling to herself, Elisabeth sat down at the chair the footman pulled out for her. The boys took their seats on either side of her, with William at the head of the table. Matthew had to fling the baggy sleeves out of his way as he reached for a glass.

"Careful now, Matthew. And besides, you must wait for the head of the table to take the first bite."

She looked at William and nodded. He took up his knife and fork and pretended to cut a piece of meat, putting it in his mouth.

They play-acted, eating an entire meal, and making appropriate

conversation. They all dissolved into laughter several times as different *faux-pas* were made. However, by the end of the make-believe meal, the boys started to understand the many contrivances of elegant dining.

As the 'meal' was winding down, Matthew suddenly took Elisabeth's hand and turned serious. "Are you going to leave us, Miss Steele?"

Elisabeth was taken aback by the question. She turned to Matthew, seeing that he was genuinely upset. She squeezed his hand and patted his with her other hand. "I will remain here for as long as you need me, Matthew. Don't worry about that."

He smiled up at her. "Good. I like you. You remind me of Mama."

She sucked in a surprised breath. Glancing over at William to gauge his reaction, he smiled at her. "Yes, you do. You have the same kind eyes as Mama."

Tears came to her eyes, and she held them back with some difficulty. She had become so fond of the boys in the few short weeks she had been with them. They had been through so much in the last year. Her heart went out to them, feeling a motherly protectiveness come over her. Losing their mother and having a new governess every few weeks had not helped them adjust. Matthew did not even remember his father, and William had very few snatches of memories. She could not imagine the heartache they had been through.

She was glad that she had been called upon to help. She took out her handkerchief and wiped her moistened eyes. "Well, now, I think that is enough of table etiquette for one day. You boys have done very well, and I think you deserve a reward."

Elisabeth stood, nodding to the footman. "Thank you, my good man. It was a most excellent meal." The boys thanked him as well, and William escorted Elisabeth back out into the drawing room.

"Let's get you changed out of your costumes, and then I have a treat for you."

The boys looked at her excitedly. "What is it?" William asked.

"It is supposed to be my half-day off. How would you like to come home with me for the afternoon and meet my family? I have brothers who are very near your ages that I think you would get along with."

The boys brightened at this and started stripping off their costumes to reveal their regular clothes underneath. Elisabeth gathered the discarded articles of clothing, and they all went up to the classroom together. She retrieved a shawl and told the boys to get their jackets. "It will be chilly this evening when we walk home."

She told Mrs Taylor they were going out, leaving out that she was planning to take them to her home. She was not sure Mrs Taylor would approve and knew that Lord Hensol definitely wouldn't if he ever found out.

They took their time walking to her home, getting sidetracked with catching a butterfly in the meadow just off the road. Matthew was not quick enough to catch it with his bare hands and soon gave up. He came back to the road, breathless and smiling, nonetheless. "Maybe next time," Elisabeth encouraged.

When they reached her home, she opened the little wooden gate and waved her hand majestically above the house. "Here we are! May I present the Steele Mansion!" she teased. The boys followed her to the front door, becoming a bit shy as she introduced them to her siblings. "Master William, Master Matthew, this is my mother, Mrs Steele. And this is my sister, Harriet." She went over to her sister, who was kneading bread dough. She was covered in flour but took the time to give a slight curtsy and a smile of greeting. "And this is my sister, Mary, brother, John, my other brother, Thomas, and my youngest sister, Jane." Elisabeth went down the line, holding her hand above each of their heads as they were introduced.

John stepped forward, as the man of the house, and welcomed the boys. "We're glad to make your acquaintance," he said. "You want to go out to the brook and go fishing?"

William and Matthew liked the sound of that. Elisabeth asked her mother if she would finish kneading so that she and Harriet could take the children down to the brook. "Of course," her mother said, no doubt craving some peace and quiet. Elisabeth picked up Jane, now four years old, and they all headed down to the creek.

"How is life in the big house? Master William and Master Matthew seem to have warmed to you," Harriet asked, taking seven-year-old Mary's hand.

"They have. And I've warmed to them. It was near-instantaneous, actually." Elisabeth shielded her eyes against the glaring midday sunshine as they walked. "Be careful not to fall in boys!" she called to the four boys as they raced towards the brook. Thomas and John had grabbed their makeshift poles leaning against the side of the cottage as they'd come out the door. "You can share with us," they had told William and Matthew as they'd walked.

"The boys seem very well-behaved. And quite good looking, too. Do they be share any resemblance to Lord Hensol?" Harriet asked curiously.

Elisabeth grinned. "How astute of you to notice. Yes, they do, if you must know."

"Is he very romantic? What does he look like?" Harriet asked. "

"What makes you think he is romantic? Really, Harriet, you read too many novels. I will admit that he is handsome, but he is no romantic. He is a sour-faced, cold young man. He's very serious and has no imagination whatsoever."

Harriet gave her a knowing smile. "You like him, then?"

Elisabeth blushed. They neared the bank of the brook, the boys' laughter ringing out over the meadow beyond. "He is an earl, Harriet. Lord of the county. I'm just a governess."

"True. But earls have married governesses before, I am sure. Why shouldn't it happen to you?"

"Who said anything about marriage?" Elisabeth laughed. "No, it is foolish to think of yourself as more than you are. I am nothing to him. Indeed, he does not like me very much. He does not agree with my teaching methods." Elisabeth rolled her eyes and told Harriet about all the run-ins she had had during her first days at Hensol Manor.



"My goodness. He is quite severe, isn't he?"

Elisabeth and Harriet walked along the bank, the little girls picking wildflowers as they went. They sat down near the edge of the water, watching as John and Thomas showed William and Matthew how to cast. Elisabeth started to weave a flower crown out of the flowers Mary and Jane brought to her, talking all the while as her nimble fingers worked. "Lord Hensol is a busy man. He works hard, and I know that everything he does is for William and Matthew. I cannot fault him for that."

"But surely he must know that children learn better when they are allowed free expression?"

"He does not think so. I almost feel guilty, though. He has been gone for the last few weeks, and I have carried on teaching them as I am used to. I only hope he doesn't find out. I am afraid the butler will tell him."

Elisabeth finished one of the crowns and placed it on Jane's head, starting on Mary's next.

"Anyone can see you've become attached to the boys. And they don't seem like the misbehaving boys you told us they used to be before you went to Hensol."

"Mrs Taylor, the housekeeper, says they have changed drastically over the last few weeks. They are dear boys, aren't they?"

Harriet glanced over at the boys, cheering and dancing around. William had caught his first fish. "Well done, Will!" she called.

"And you're sure you are not attracted to their brother?" Harriet pressed. "You blush every time I say his name."

Elisabeth shook her head, letting out a long breath. "It is hopeless, Harriet. There is no possibility of him even thinking of me in that way. No, I am there to teach his brothers and prepare them for Eton. Nothing more."

Harriet rolled her eyes. "If you say so."

Elisabeth gave her a slight push, wishing that she would leave well enough alone. "I say so," she said firmly, hoping that she would drop the subject.

After a few hours of basking in the sunshine, they went back up to the house for supper. The boys relished in the relaxed feel of the meal, joking with Thomas and John. They said their goodbyes reluctantly, planning to come for another visit soon. Elisabeth walked home with them as the sun began to sink below the horizon. Harriet's words rang in her head, going round and round like a never-ending echo. *Earls have married governesses before ...*

Elisabeth kicked the thought out of her mind. Harriet's idea was a romantic dream that would never come true.

## Chapter 13

Charles returned home, relieved to see the battlements of Hensol Manor appear in the distance. His trip to London had been a success, in more ways than one. He was well on his way to keeping his promise to his mother. However, as he left the bustle of London, he felt a slight unease at the step he had taken with Lady Amelia. For some inexplicable reason, he could not get Miss Steele out of his thoughts. She had been there, haunting him, intruding upon his dreams during his entire trip.

He was hesitant to admit it, but he had missed her. It was strange since he barely knew her. Of course, he had missed his brothers as well. He found himself wondering what she was thinking, what she would say to him when they were together again.

He had sent a note ahead of him, asking Benjamin and his wife if they would like to ride with him later and see how progress on the wall was coming. He had missed seeing his old friend over the last few weeks while he had been away. Anna, Benjamin's wife and a long-time friend of Charles' would want to know that he was courting Lady Amelia. She had always insisted that he keep her abreast of any development in the love arena.

The servants were lined up out front to greet him, welcoming him home after his long journey. He talked with the butler as he walked inside, asking how things had run in his absence. "Nothing to report, My Lord." Charles was relieved that all had gone smoothly during his absence.

"And the boys? They were no trouble?"

"Not in the slightest, My Lord. Miss Steele has kept them under

control," the butler replied. Usually, he would have a long list of things to report that his brothers had broken when he was away. He was shocked to hear that they had behaved like perfect little gentlemen.

"Where are they now?" Charles asked. Usually, they came racing out to the drive to meet him when he returned from a long journey.

"They are upstairs, My Lord," Mrs Taylor interjected. "Shall I call for them?"

"No need. I'll go up myself and see how they are getting on." He handed his hat to the butler and bounded up the stairs to the second floor. Pushing the door to the classroom open, he expected to see the boys working diligently away on their arithmetic or something of the like. However, when he peeked his head around the door, he saw that the classroom was completely empty.

He frowned, opening the door wide. He went back out into the hall and walked down to the boys' bedroom. Knocking softly, he turned the handle and peeked inside. The curtains were still drawn, but he could see that his brothers were indeed still in bed. He opened the door wide and was about to call to them when he heard a shush come from behind the door. Miss Steele stepped out, setting down a tea tray.

"What is the meaning of this?" Charles whispered harshly. "Why are my brothers lazing about in bed?"

Miss Steele placed a finger over her lips and motioned him out into the hall. However, he did not budge, placing his hands on his hips. "I asked you a question, Miss Steele," he said menacingly.

She lowered her gaze, glancing tentatively at his brothers. No doubt,

she was afraid to wake them, but Charles could care less. It was nearly time for luncheon, and they should have been up hours ago. What kind of governess let her pupils sleep until noon?

"Your brothers are not feeling well this morning. They had a bit too much excitement yesterday." She straightened, drawing herself up to her full height, and met his gaze, her eyes blazing with a silent challenge. She squared her shoulder, ready to defend his brothers.

"What do you mean they had too much *excitement*?" He watched her search for an answer, wondering if she was actually trying to concoct a lie to tell him.

"I only meant that ..." she began, but the butler came up the steps and announced that Benjamin and Anna had arrived.

"I'll be right down," he said, dismissing the butler. He turned back to Miss Steele and waited.

She lowered her gaze then, guilt washing over her features. "I took the boys to my home yesterday," she began. She then rushed on to explain herself. "It was supposed to be my half-day. I thought they would like to have some other children to play with. They had a wonderful time with my brothers, who are only a few years older. Well, anyway, they played the whole afternoon and were quite tired when we arrived home."

"You took them to your house?" Charles could hardly believe his ears. This woman had some nerve taking his brothers to a dirty little cottage to spend an afternoon. "My brothers spent the afternoon doing what exactly?" Visions of his brothers rolling in muck and wrestling farm animals flooded his mind. How could Miss Steele have been so presumptuous?

"They went fishing. William even caught one, and we had it for dinner ..."

"Wonderful! My brothers don't know how to swim, Miss Steele. What would you have done if one of them had fallen in?"

"I would have pulled him out. Indeed, they could have stood up and been just fine. The water is not deep." Miss Steele remained calm, standing before him with the gall to tell him that his brothers had spent an entire day in the company of commoners. "I apologize, My Lord. I did not think you would mind. They had completed their lessons for the day and were wanting an outing. I did not see the harm in taking them to meet some children their own age."

"You are correct in one thing. *You didn't think*. You seem to be forgetting your place, Miss Steele. It is not for you to decide where my brothers spend their free time. It is for you to teach them, and that is all."

She blinked, but he did not allow her a chance to defend herself. "And now my brothers are lying in bed when they should be studying. Are they ill or just tired?"

"I believe they are just over-tired. They are not in any danger."

He nodded. "This is the kind of indulgence I warned you about, Miss Steele." He stopped, taking a deep breath. He looked down at her rumpled skirts and wondered if she had spent the night by their bedside. "Did you tend them all night long?"

She nodded. "Matthew had a slight cough, but after he went to sleep, he was fine. I wanted to be there in case they needed anything."

Charles was struck by her devotion to the boys. Perhaps he had been too hard on her. He raised an eyebrow, trying to keep his firm stance. "That was kind of you," he said, softening slightly. "I must charge you never to do a thing like that again." He turned away, starting towards the stairs.

"Yes, My Lord." She turned and was about to open the door again when he stopped her in her tracks.

"Wait." He thought for a moment, his mind racing. "Come here."

"Sir?" She asked, confused. She let her hand fall away from the doorknob and took a step towards him. He watched her face drain of all its colour, no doubt fearing that he was about to sack her.

"You're coming riding with us," he blurted. Miss Steele's face registered surprise, looking as if she would flee back into the boys' room. "Since your pupils are too tired to do their lessons, you might as well come out and see the grounds." He didn't know why he had suggested it. The words had come out of his mouth before he could process what he was saying. He wanted to get to know this woman better. She was spending so much time with his brothers, after all. He wanted to see that she was a good influence on them.

"I have not ridden in years." She blushed, the colour rising in her cheeks, making her look even lovelier. He took a step closer to her, studying her features.

"Well, we must remedy that. Come along, Miss Steele. I don't like to be

kept waiting." He turned and started to walk back towards the staircase, looking over his shoulder to see if she was following or not. She hesitated, reaching again for the doorknob. However, she let her hand fall back to her side.

"I will need a moment," she replied. He could see she was hoping he would let her off the hook. He waved his hand and nodded.

"Very well. We will wait for you in the foyer." Charles bounded down the steps before she could come up with another excuse. Benjamin and Anna were waiting in the foyer, talking quietly with Mrs Taylor.

"Hello, Benjamin. Anna. How are you?" Charles extended his hand and shook Benjamin's.

"We are well, thank you. How was your journey?"

"It was very fruitful," he said cryptically. Anna raised an eyebrow, a grin breaking out on her face.

"Oh? You must give us details, Charles. You know I don't like being kept in the dark on such matters."

"Of course." Charles laughed. "We are waiting for one more person, and then we can be off."

Benjamin frowned. "Oh? Who?"



"I've invited our new governess to join us. She has not seen the whole grounds yet, only the gardens around the house. It seems my brothers are a bit under the weather today." He gave no further explanation, for Miss Steele appeared at the top of the stairs. Charles turned, his blood starting to pound in his ears. Even in a simple tan cotton dress, she looked beautiful. He was convinced that she would look beautiful if she wore a dress made of gunny sacks.

"Miss Steele." He extended his hand, motioning towards Benjamin and Anna. "These are my good friends, Lord and Lady Graham. Lord and Lady Graham, Miss Steele."

She curtsied to them as he introduced them, Anna giving him a knowing smile. Anna stepped forward and extended her hand to Miss Steele. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Steele. Lord Hensol tells us that the boys are not feeling well today? I hope it is nothing serious."

Miss Steele smiled. "Nothing that a good rest won't cure." She glanced at Charles and quickly looked away.

Benjamin stepped forward then, taking Miss Steele's hand and placing a kiss on it as if she were a lady. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Steele."

Charles clapped his hands together and stepped between her and Benjamin. "Well, shall we be off?"

"Indeed," Benjamin said, leading his wife out the door. Charles shot Miss Steele a glance, wondering if she would refuse to come after all.

She stood rooted to her spot on the carpet, looking like a frightened rabbit that had been cornered by a myriad of hounds.

"What is the matter, Miss Steele?" he asked, striding towards her.

"Are you certain that you want me to come along? It is not quite proper ..." she twisted her fingers around the material in her dress.

"Nonsense. Besides, I thought you did not care about what is proper or not." He could see that his words stung and regretted saying them as soon as they came out of his mouth. Why was he being so churlish? His brothers had come to no harm at going for a visit to Miss Steele's home. There were no children their age in the vicinity. None that were of noble birth, that is. He softened, offering his arm in apology. "Come, Miss Steele. We mustn't keep them waiting."

She looked at his outstretched arm and stepped away, shaking her head. "Very well." She did not take his arm, but instead, strode out the door and started walking towards the stable. He let out a breath and followed her. He could not allow her to upend him.

## Chapter 14

Elisabeth felt like her heart had jumped into her throat as she walked out to the stables with Lord Hensol and his friends. His tone had carried an authority that she knew would broach no argument. Why he would want her to come riding with him and his high-society friends was beyond her. Perhaps he wanted to check up on her and catch her out.

"Do you need help, Miss Steele?" Lord Hensol came to her side as the horses were brought out. She tried to look braver than she felt. The horses stamped their feet and whinnied, eager to be out of the stables.

"I will, yes. Is there a stool I might stand on to help me mount?" Why had she agreed to come riding? The great beast towered over her, making her feel as if she were a tiny ant. The steed's muscles rippled under its glossy, black coat. She looked around for a stable boy to ask for a stool.

"Nonsense. Here, I'll show you what to do." Lord Hensol took the reins and placed his foot in the stirrup. "Take the reins like this and pull yourself up."

As if it were that easy. Elisabeth swallowed, saying nothing in return. She gulped silently. She took the reins as he'd demonstrated and put her foot in the stirrup. When she tried to pull herself up, the horse sidestepped, making Elisabeth stumble slightly. Lord Hensol steadied her, placing his hands on her waist.

"Never mind. Here," he replied gently. He helped her as she pulled herself up onto the horse. Once settled in the side saddle, she gripped

the reins like a vice. She tried to slow her breathing, unsure if she were nervous about being on a horse after years of not riding or if it had been Lord Hensol's touch.

Lord Hensol mounted in one fluid motion, smiling at her surreptitiously. "Shall we?"

Elisabeth nodded, praying that they didn't gallop off at lightning speed without her. Worse than being left alone would be if her horse followed their lead and galloped off after them. She would surely be flung from the horse's back.

Lord Hensol led them out of the gate and onto the lonely country road, nudging his horse into a light trot. Lord and Lady Graham followed his lead, and Elisabeth swore under her breath, even though it was not ladylike. She nudged the horse gently, and he followed his compatriots at a leisurely pace. Thankfully, her steed seemed perfectly happy to trot along slowly.

Elisabeth was glad that she had bundled up, for the weather had turned chilly. She wished she had some rabbit fur-lined gloves, but she would have to make do with the simple leather ones.

After a while, she settled into the saddle, remembering how to guide the horse. She remained at the back of the pack, listening to Lord Hensol and his friends chat as they rode. However, Lady Graham soon pulled up, waiting for her to catch up. "We shall let the men go ahead. All they ever want to talk about is the cricket match."

Lady Graham had a warm smile, with vibrant green eyes and auburn hair. She looked so stately as she sat atop her mount as if she were born to be a queen rather than a country lady. "How are you settling

in at Hensol Manor? I know the boys can be quite difficult."

Elisabeth was at a loss for words momentarily. She had not expected Lady Graham to enter into any kind of conversation with her. "I ... it has not been difficult to settle in. Master William and Master Matthew are dear boys and brilliant pupils when they put their minds to it." Elisabeth glanced at Lord Hensol, wondering if he could overhear their conversation. "They are very imaginative and do well when they are allowed to explore the world as they learn, rather than sitting in a stuffy classroom all day."

"I quite agree. Children should be allowed their freedom. While it is available to them. I believe William will be heading off to Eton in a year or so, won't he?"

"Yes, he will." The thought made Elisabeth sad. She would miss him when he was gone. And she knew Matthew would as well. Perhaps Lord Hensol would allow William to stay at home an extra year and then send the boys off together? She would be out of the job then. The stress of finding another position was too much to think on at the moment, so she turned her thoughts to happier subjects.

"Have you lived in the vicinity long, Lady Graham?"

Lady Graham waved her hand and scoffed. "Please, call me Anna. I'll never get used to being called Lady Graham."

Elisabeth thought that odd. She had expected her to be stuck up and to put on airs in front of her. However, Lady Graham was very down to earth. "You and Lord Graham have been recently married?"

"Yes. At the beginning of spring. I have lived in the area all my life, but I was a housemaid before I became Lady Graham." Anna seemed to be holding back a grin as if she were waiting to see what Elisabeth's reaction would be.

"A housemaid? I don't understand." Elisabeth glanced at Lord Graham's back, taking in his handsome profile for a moment. "You were not born a Lady, then?" Elisabeth wished she could snatch the words back and swallow them. It was too late, though. The impertinent question was out, and she could not take it back now.

Lady Graham laughed. "No, I was not. I was born the lowly daughter of a blacksmith, if you can believe it. I'm not ashamed of my heritage or my family. I went to work for Benjamin's parents when I was fourteen. He and I noticed each other straight off, but we knew that his parents would never allow us to get married. He waited until I was eighteen to propose, and when his father died last year, God rest him, we decided that it was time to get married. His mother was none-too-pleased, but she's got used to the idea." Lady Graham shook her head. "I know we'll never be fast friends, but at least there is a mutual respect between us now."

"It must be difficult, coming into a family that doesn't accept you right off." Elisabeth stole another glance at Lord Hensol. The memory of his hands on her waist as he'd helped her up onto her horse made her cheeks burn. She hoped that Lady Graham could not guess what she was thinking. Lord Hensol would never lower himself to marry a girl like Elisabeth.

"How do you find working for Lord Hensol?" Lady Graham asked. She seemed to make casual conversation, but Elisabeth wondered if she had read her mind. She cleared her throat and decided on a diplomatic approach, just in case her employer was listening.

"He is a kind and considerate employer. I am lucky to have the position." Elisabeth watched Lady Graham's eyes flash, raising an eyebrow. "Even if he is a bit serious," she added, lowering her voice.

Anna nodded, pulling her horse to a slow walk. Elisabeth followed her lead, allowing the men to travel further ahead. "Charles is a good man despite his serious demeanour. He works very hard, and he loves his brothers, even if he doesn't always know how to show it."

"I have noticed that. He is different when he is with his brothers," Elisabeth admitted.

"His mother was very hard on him. She placed impossible standards on him, and even though she is gone, he is still trying to live up to them."

Elisabeth watched him and Lord Graham stop, waiting for the ladies to catch up at the top of the hill. "Come along! We haven't got all day!" Lord Hensol called. Lord Graham rolled his eyes.

"We're coming!" Lady Graham replied. She spurred her horse into a light trot, riding up to her husband's side. Elisabeth still did not want to take any chances. She hoped that they would not wait for her, but they waited for her to catch up instead of going on.

"Getting used to riding again, are we, Miss Steele?" Lord Hensol asked, studying her as she approached.

"Yes, thank you."

She could feel her cheeks were on fire once again, berating herself for being embarrassed. They went over the rise, and Lord Hensol motioned towards the base of the hill. "What do you think?" The finished wall lined the bottom of the hill. The landscape beyond was dotted with sheep.

"It's turned out wonderful. Well done, Charles," Benjamin praised.

They looked down on the finished wall, Elisabeth enjoying the beautiful landscape spread before her. "Was it worth the ride, Miss Steele? You have not been out this far, have you?"

"It's breathtaking," she sighed. Elisabeth could feel his eyes on her, and she kept her gaze forward, looking out over the rolling hills. "This is all your land?"

"It is." She could tell by the tone of his voice that he was proud of it. He smiled over at her, and she smiled back. "Well, shall we head back?"

Lord and Lady Graham answered in the affirmative, and they all turned their mounts toward Hensol. Instead of joining Lord Graham, however, Lord Hensol stayed by her side, trotting along silently. She resituated herself in the saddle, wondering why he was riding by her side instead of with his friends.

"How is your family faring, Miss Steele?"

Elisabeth was taken aback by the question, wondering how he knew



anything about her family. "They are doing well, thank you."

"How many siblings do you have?"

"Four: two sisters and two brothers. All younger than I," Elisabeth replied.

"And your parents?"

Elisabeth became even more uncomfortable under his scrutiny. "My mother is well, but my father passed away two years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that. My father died four years ago."

"I'm sorry. That must have been difficult for you and your mother and brothers."

"It was. He was a good man. But he was quite a bit older than my mother when they married. I think she understood that she would outlive him when they decided to marry. We could have never guessed she would be taken only a few short years after him."

There was such sadness in his voice. She wanted to reach out and place her hand on his arm to comfort him. That would have been highly inappropriate, however. She simply nodded. "I'm sorry," she said again, knowing it could not convey the true depth of her feelings. Losing her father had turned her world upside down. Elisabeth looked up as a single raindrop landed on her cheek. Thunder

rolled in the distance, seeming ready to unleash a deluge from the heavens. The rain started falling in earnest, and Lord Hensol yelled for them all to take cover under a nearby copse of oak trees. He spurred his horse into a gallop, and Elisabeth did the same, even though nervous about doing so. She managed to stay on her mount until they reached the makeshift covering offered by the branches.

Lord Hensol took her reins and held the horse steady as she climbed down. She landed with a huff and walked closer to the tree. "Here, take this," Lord Hensol offered. He took off his outer jacket and handed it to her.

"Oh, no, please. I am quite warm." She tried to hand it back to him, but he would not take it.

"Nonsense. Hold it over your head. It will keep you reasonably dry." He looked up at the heavens, the dark grey clouds growing darker by the second. "I do not think it will let up anytime soon."

Lord Graham did the same for his wife as he held her close. The storm picked up with vehemence, and Lord Hensol crossed his arms over his chest. He stood side by side with Elisabeth, leaning against the trunk of the tree. "Hunker down, Miss Steele. We may be here for a while."

## Chapter 15

Charles watched as Elisabeth tried to hold the coat up over her head. He could tell that her arms were getting tired, so he took one corner and helped her keep it aloft. "Thank you," she murmured. Was she still frightened of him? He couldn't blame her after his blow-up outside the boys' room earlier.

Charles glanced over at Benjamin and Anna, cuddling close to each other for warmth. Bouncing his eyes away, he shifted his weight from one leg to the other, leaning up against the tree for support. Tiny raindrops fell through the branches of the oak, soaking into his shoulders and dripping down the edge of his hat and into his collar. His jacket would be wet through at this rate.

"I suppose you'll be irked with me for convincing you to come along," Charles replied with a hint of laughter in his tone. Miss Steele looked up at him, her beautiful blue-green eyes sparkling.

"Not at all. I enjoy a bit of adventure." Elisabeth looked up at the heavens, and he did the same.

"Awfully uncomfortable affairs, though, aren't they? I suppose it's much more convenient to read about them in books." Charles smiled.

"Indeed. But much less like an adventure if you have to read about them than experience them." Elisabeth's laugh was drowned out by the deluge. For some reason, he was glad that he had been the only one to hear, capturing it in his memory for himself alone. The idea was ridiculous, of course, but even still.

A long silence stretched between them as they each watched the rain pour down. Little rivulets began to form as they made their way downhill. She sidestepped, her boots impeding the flow of one of them. She edged closer to him, being careful not to touch his shoulder with her own.

"I'm sorry about your mother. I know it doesn't help to have people say so. But I want you to know all the same. Your brothers have been through a lot, and I can see how much they miss her." Elisabeth met his gaze, her eyes filled with compassion.

Something inside him was touched by her words. It was true that words alone could not heal grief. However, he was grateful to her for trying to soothe it. Her words were like a healing balm that he didn't even know he needed. "Thank you. It is very kind of you to say. The boys have warmed to you in such a short amount of time. I'm glad they have not pulled any nasty tricks on you. That is, they have not pulled any pranks on you, have they? I assume I would have heard about it before now?"

"No, they have been perfect little gentlemen. They have a prime example to follow."

"In whom?" Charles asked, not understanding. She blushed very prettily before answering.

"I meant in you, sir. They idolize you."

"Oh," Charles said, feeling dull for having not caught her meaning. He supposed he did not expect his brothers to care much for him. He was never around for very long. It was something he wanted to remedy but didn't exactly know how to do.

"Matthew said something very curious the other day while we were having our etiquette lesson," Elisabeth went on.

"Oh? And what is that?"

"He said that I resemble your mother." Elisabeth tried to blow a straight piece of hair out of her eyes. It floated up above her forehead and then landed in the same place again.

"Allow me," Charles said and tucked it behind her ear for her. His hand lingered on the side of her face for a moment too long, and he quickly pulled it back. A man could get lost in those eyes. She lowered her gaze and mumbled a thank-you. Taking a deep breath, he went on. "You do resemble her when she was younger. You both have the same colour hair and the same smile."

His heart was beating fast, and he was sure she could hear it. "My mother married my father when she was only fifteen. My father was much older – in his early forties. Even so, they made a good life together. While it lasted ..." He straightened, wishing that he had not said the last part. "You are kind and imaginative like she was. I am glad that Matthew and Will have someone who reminds them of her. And I'm relieved to find they have not been pulling their usual tricks on you."

"What kind of pranks did they pull on the other governesses? For the life of me, I cannot imagine them being anything but sweet and kind."

"They have an ornery streak. The worst prank they pulled was they gathered spiders for a week and put them in Miss Johnson's bed."

Elisabeth straightened and let out a laugh. "They didn't!"

"They did." He laughed. "She left the next morning without giving notice. And I couldn't blame her there. They've also put pepper in their tea – and ink. I was so angry when I found out about that one. They pretended that they were both deaf when Miss Dunby first came on. And then there was the usual pretending to be sick."

Elisabeth laughed all the more. "My goodness. I cannot fathom that kind of behaviour coming from Masters William and Matthew."

"I'm glad my mother wasn't here to see them behave like that."

"Mrs Taylor has told me that they didn't start acting up until after she had passed. It must have been very difficult for them to understand what was happening. Especially Matthew."

"Yes, it was. At least they have each other. I do not know what one would do without the other. It's almost as if they are twins, born a few years apart."

"Their love for each other keeps them strong. I suppose that is all one can hope for. To share one's life with someone one loves."

"It is what all wish for, and few receive," Charles said. It sounded more cynical than he had wished. She turned her gaze on him, something he could not decipher passing through her expression.

"That is correct, unfortunately." She gazed back up at the sky, the clouds beginning to brighten as the sun came back out. "It looks as if the rain is slowing. Should we not try to head back to the manor?"

"Yes," Charles replied, reluctant to end their moment together. "Allow me to help you remount." He walked her over to her horse. She handed his jacket back to him, but he held up his hand to refuse. "Keep it. You can wrap it around your shoulders for the ride back."

"That's very kind. Thank you." He helped her up and stayed by her side until she was situated. Wrapping his jacket around her shoulders, she waited for him to mount. Benjamin was helping Anna up, and soon they were all trotting back to the manor, the light sprinkle of rain slowly soaking through their clothes.

Elisabeth rode several yards ahead of him, spurring her horse forward any time he was close to catching up to her. He had wanted to talk with her some more, but she seemed to be avoiding him now. Had he done something to anger her?

As they rode in relative silence, he began to think that his decision to enter into an official courtship with Amelia might have been too hasty. He watched Benjamin and Anna for a moment. They had made their relationship work, overcoming each hurdle as it came. The fact that he was even considering Miss Steele in that light made him uneasy. He did not want to go back on his word with Lady Amelia. However, Miss Steele was beginning to interest him more and more.

When they arrived back at the manor's front steps, he helped Elisabeth down from her steed. She said a hasty goodbye to Benjamin and Anna and then made her way inside.

"Come inside for a drink and some refreshments before you head home. The rain should have stopped by then."

"Thank you, old chap. What do you say, dear?"

"Yes, I'd like to get out of the rain for a while." Anna took Benjamin's arm, and he led her inside. Hoping to see Miss Steele in the hallway, Charles looked around for her as they came inside. She was nowhere to be seen. Disappointed, he led Anna and Benjamin into the parlour and called for the fire to be tended. "And bring refreshments and hot tea, please, Mrs Taylor."

"Of course, My Lord." Mrs Taylor turned, but Charles caught up to her before she could exit. "And where is Miss Steele? I think Lady Graham would like some female company if she is willing to join us."

Surprised, Mrs Taylor looked as if she were about to protest but then thought better of it. "I will see if I can locate her, sir, and send her down."

"Thank you. She is not under any obligation to come down, Mrs Taylor. She is fully within her means to refuse if she is not up for it." Charles nodded, dismissing her. "That is all."

Mrs Taylor curtsied and left the room. A maid soon appeared, and before long, there was a roaring fire blazing in the hearth. The three friends stood near the fire, warming themselves. Hot tea was brought in, and they were munching away on dainty tea sandwiches and petit fours before long.



"I am glad you decided to invite Miss Steele along on the ride. We had a very nice conversation," Anna remarked. Charles could see she was giving him a curious glance, studying his demeanour. He tried to keep a cool mask in place. He did not want to let on that he was interested in Miss Steele beyond making sure that his brothers' education was coming along as it should.

"Yes, she has been a good influence on the boys." He did not mention how he had reacted when she'd told him that they had spent the day previous with her siblings.

"Do not try to shield your feelings from us, my good man. A blind man would be able to see that your interest in her is more than just academic." Anna laughed at him as he baulked. She had a very blunt way of speaking, having not got used to how well-bred young women spoke in veiled meanings. He liked her candour, usually. However, today it was making him acutely uncomfortable.

"I haven't the slightest notion of what you are talking about." Charles handed his cup to the maid, and she poured him some more tea.

Anna and Benjamin both gave him a wry smile. "We saw how you were looking at Miss Steele under the oak tree. You forget how well I know you, old chap. We've been friends for too long for you to pull one over on me."

"You both are incorrigible." Charles stood and walked over to the window, taking his cup of tea with him. He looked out over the landscape. The rain was coming down in torrents again. They had made it back to the manor just in time, it would seem. "Miss Steele is my employee. That is all. Besides, I have some news."

They both watched him expectantly. He let out a breath and tried to paste a sincere smile on his face. "Lady Amelia and I are courting."

Benjamin and Anna shared a glance and then smiled knowingly at him. There would be no hiding from them. He rolled his eyes. "Can we please change the subject?"

"Very well," Anna conceded. "However, Miss Steele is a lovely young woman. I would not mind having a friend that understood me as she would. It can be very lonely at the top, especially when the other married ladies of the ton won't accept me into their circles."

"I thought I was all you needed?" Benjamin teased. Anna laughed and touched his cheek.

"You are, my dear. But it would be nice to have a lady friend."

Charles agreed with her silently. How wonderful would it be to have a woman by his side whom he could not only share a home but his heart?

## Chapter 16

Elisabeth did not want to go down to tea. She had had enough of making a fool of herself for one day. Besides, she did not belong in the parlour having tea with the lords and lady. She was a governess. Her place was with William and Matthew.

When she knocked on the door to the boys' room, William called for her to come in. "There you are! We were wondering what happened when you didn't make us get up for our lessons this morning."

William was sitting up in bed with a book spread open over his lap. Elisabeth smiled as she came in and sat down on the edge of his bed. "Have you been reading to each other?"

"Yes. Well, I've been reading to Matthew mostly."

"Very good. Are you two feeling better?"

"Much better. Thank you for giving us a holiday, Miss Steele." Matthew sat up in bed, copying his brother. She leaned across the way and took his hand.

"I'm glad you're feeling better. You had me a bit worried."

"Where did you go? We heard Charles come in earlier. We hope he didn't give you a ticking off?" William asked, furrowing his brow.

"That is none of your concern." Elisabeth jumped when she heard Lord Hensol's deep voice sound behind her. He entered the room with something akin to a scowl on his face. However, she could tell that he was about to crack a smile, the corners of his mouth quivering with the effort to hold it back. She stood and curtsied, lowering her gaze.

He took a step toward her, looking as if he wanted to say something to her in private. Glancing at the boys, he lowered his voice and reached for her. She instinctively backed away. His arm dropped, giving her an apologetic nod. "We were sorry you didn't come down for tea. Lady Graham missed you."

"I needed to check on the boys. I am sorry if I caused you any inconvenience," she replied, not daring to look at him. He had a knack for making her heart beat out of her chest. She did not want the boys to pick up on her discomfort.

"You could never be an inconvenience," he whispered, almost too low for her to hear. Her head snapped up. He shook his head, laughing nervously. He turned to his brothers, the moment gone. She turned, folding her hands tightly in front of her.

"What have you boys been up to? I hope you're feeling better. Miss Steele said you had a long day yesterday." Lord Hensol sat down on Matthew's bed. The boys exchanged nervous glances, not wanting to get her in trouble. She stepped in before they felt the need to lie.

"Yes. You had a wonderful time with my siblings, didn't you? William even caught a fish." Elisabeth hoped that Lord Hensol's anger had cooled since earlier that morning. He seemed to be in a better mood to her at any rate. The boys relaxed and told him all about wading in the stream and eating dinner with her family. William patted the bed, inviting her to sit down. Lord Hensol looked up at her when she did

not move, motioned for her to join them.

"Please sit down, Miss Steele."

She did as she was told, feeling her nervousness melt away slightly. Elisabeth took the time to study Lord Hensol. His handsome features were even more so when he was smiling. And he smiled a lot when he was in the company of his brothers.

"We were just about to ask Miss Steele if she would read to us when you came in, Charles. Can she?" Matthew held out a book for her.

"What a splendid idea. What is this?" Charles took the book from him and handed it over to Elisabeth, his fingers brushing hers as he did. She blushed furiously and tried to hide it by opening the book and covering her face.

"It is *The Canterbury Tales*," William replied.

Lord Hensol raised an eyebrow. "Really? And do you think they are old enough to understand it?"

She lowered the book and prayed that her blush had disappeared. "If ever there is a section that they do not understand, we pause and discuss it."

"Yes, Charles. It's awfully good fun. Won't you stay and read with us for a while? Miss Steele even lets me read sometimes," William chimed

in. Elisabeth prayed for the second time in the space of a moment that Lord Hensol would refuse. His presence up-ended her, making her feel tense and guarded.

"I would be most happy to join you. The rain has ruined my plans, anyway." Lord Hensol stood, ringing for Mrs Taylor. "However, I think some tea and biscuits are in order, don't you?"

The boys' faces brightened, their enthusiasm bubbling forth as they bounced in their beds. Matthew climbed out from under the covers and went to the window. "My goodness, it is really coming down, isn't it?"

William joined him at the window, and they pressed their noses against the cold glass. "It is good that we made it to South America when we did, isn't it, Miss Steele?"

Elisabeth stood and joined them at the window. The glass was fogging with their breath. She ushered them back to their beds and smiled. "It is, indeed."

"And where did you land, may I ask?" Lord Hensol asked, joining in with the make-believe.

"We had to dock on Haiti first, to resupply. Then we are off to the Amazon," Matthew explained matter-of-factly. Elisabeth watched Lord Hensol's face for any sign of displeasure. He showed none. Apparently, he was starting to relax his standards for the boys' education. That is, perhaps he was not going to be as strict with his demands on her teaching methods? However, she did not want to mention any more of their excursions if that were not the case.

"Come and sit down. We can read a little while we are waiting for the tea to be delivered," Elisabeth asserted, ushering the boys to their beds. "Quickly, now."

The boys did as they were told, and Lord Hensol retrieved a chair from against the wall rather than sit on Matthew's bed. He turned so that he could look at her as she read.

She opened the book to the place they had left off, feeling her throat grow dry under his scrutiny. She cleared her throat and began to read, her voice cracking slightly.

After a while, she could feel herself relaxing. Lord Hensol wore a smile, rather than his usual severity. He seemed to be enjoying himself and took the time to help explain some aspects of the stories, although not all. His answers seemed to satisfy their curiosity, and they would continue.

Tea arrived as they were finishing the Miller's Tale. Elisabeth placed a small piece of paper in the book to save their spot and pour the tea. Lord Hensol seemed to be watching her every movement. Her hands shook as she poured, the teapot spout clanking against the lip of the cup more than once.

When the boys were settled with their tea and biscuits, Elisabeth offered Lord Hensol a cup. "Yes, thank you." He took the cup from her, his fingers bumping hers once again. She took her hand away quickly and set to pouring herself a cup. His lips turned up in a slight smile as he took a sip, his eyes dancing with mischief.

He looked like William when he was in a mood to misbehave. Of course, William never actually went through with his mischief. She had a feeling that she would not have been able to dissuade Lord Hensol from his schemes if he were one of her pupils.

She set her cup of tea down and took up the book again. Before she could continue to the next story, however, Lord Hensol stopped her. "Perhaps we should move onto another story, since, as I recall, the stories get a little more debauched from here on out."

"Indeed. I beg your pardon, Lord Hensol."

"Not at all. Not at all." He held up his hand, conveying that he was not angry with her for her choice. "I encourage the reading of the classics. I only feel that the boys may be a bit young yet for the concepts in these stories."

"Of course. Have you a suggestion as to our next text?"

"Yes, Charles! You read something! You are always so good at doing the voices," William piped up and settled in with another biscuit.

Lord Hensol coloured slightly. "I have not read to you in quite some time, Will. How can you remember that?"

"I always remember you coming in to read stories to us. Especially when Mother was not feeling well." William's eyes filled with a momentary sadness. "What about that poem about the lady in the balcony?"



Elisabeth frowned slightly. "Do you mean *Romeo and Juliet*?" She turned to Lord Hensol, shocked and pleased that he had been reading Shakespeare to his brothers.

It was his turn to be embarrassed. "Perhaps something a bit more comedic? How about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?"

Matthew bounced in his bed and asked for another biscuit. "Oh, yes, I do like that one. Especially when the man's head gets turned into a donkey's head."

"Puck is my favourite," William stated.

"Of course, he is," Lord Hensol said sarcastically. "You both like playing pranks just like Puck."

William shrank slightly. "Don't be cross with us, Charles. We haven't played any pranks on Miss Steele. Honest!"

"Yes, honest, Charles!" Matthew put in.

Lord Hensol laughed. "I know you haven't. Miss Steele has told me that you've been perfect gentlemen." He turned a smile towards her. "Just like me," he finished.

She lowered her eyes, feeling embarrassed all over again. Elisabeth

got up and retrieved a copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the small bookshelf.

"Here you are, My Lord. I believe it is your turn?" She held out the book for him to take, noticing that his hands were shaking a bit. Was he nervous?

"I have not read aloud in quite some time." He took the book, turning it over in his hands.

"Well, you know what the old proverb says, 'Practice makes perfect.'" Elisabeth went back to her spot on the edge of William's bed and waited. William was right. Lord Hensol's voice was warm and rich and melodic as he read. Soon, his nerves melted away, and he began to give each character its own voice. The boys were giggling, shouting out encouragement to the different characters. Elisabeth watched in wonder. Lord Hensol seemed to be a totally different person than the sour, severe man she had met upon coming to Hensol Manor.

*"Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,  
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind ..."*

Lord Hensol halted momentarily, his gaze locked on hers. He quoted it from memory rather than reading it. Elisabeth's heart jumped. William interrupted the moment, screwing up his nose.

"What does that mean, brother?"

Charles closed the book, breaking his eyes away from hers. He placed his forefinger in the book to keep their spot. "It means that love does

not always make for the best decisions."

"How can that be? Isn't love the most powerful force on earth?" William asked innocently.

Charles looked at Elisabeth rather than William. "Love is not as simple as it is in books, William. One cannot always follow one's heart. Even if he wishes to ..."

Elisabeth was sure that he would be able to hear her heart beating. Why was he looking at her so? Her mouth and throat went dry. He seemed to be looking into her very soul.

"I think that's wrong. People should always follow their heart."

Lord Hensol did not take his eyes off her, even still. He seemed conflicted in some way. She could not tell how. "I agree with you, William."

## Chapter 17

Charles finished reading the last scene of the final act, his heart beating wildly. Elisabeth had blushed through most of the play. He had not meant to embarrass her, and would have stopped, had the boys not insisted they go on. The sun had set by the time they were finished, having spent the whole of the afternoon and evening together.

He closed the book and glanced up at her. She looked away, her cheeks blossoming with colour when Matthew asked, "What's a brides-bed?"

William rolled his eyes and looked at his brother as if that were a very dull question to ask indeed. "That is where the wife sleeps, of course. The husband has his own bed in another room."

"Oh," Matthew said, satisfied with the answer. Before any more discourse could be made on the subject, Miss Steele stood.

"Well, I think we've had enough Shakespeare for one evening. It's time for you boys to go to bed." She clapped her hands, and the boys went to wash their faces in the basin. Elisabeth tidied the room as the boys were finishing. Charles picked up the books and replaced them on the shelves.

"You don't have to do that." Elisabeth tried to take over, but he held the book over his head so she could not reach it.

"I'm fully capable of putting some books away."

She blushed again. "Well, thank you." She straightened the covers on both of their beds and pulled the sheets back. The boys climbed into bed, and she tucked them in one by one. "Good night. Go to sleep now. Holiday is over."

"Good night Miss Steele. This was the best holiday we've ever had!"

"Yes, simply smashing!" Matthew echoed. "It was good to have you here, too, Charles. We should do this every night."

Charles laughed and ruffled the boys' hair as he said goodnight. "Well, I don't know about every night. However, sometimes it would be fun. Now, settle down and go to sleep. It sounds like Miss Steele has some rigorous lessons for you in the morning."

"Indeed, I do. So be prepared to learn tomorrow."

"We will!" they both promised and lay down, each of them closing their eyes. Elisabeth took up the candle, and they walked out of the room, leaving the door cracked a bit.

"That was the most enjoyable evening I've spent in a long time. Thank you." Charles walked with her down the hall for a moment. The house was a bit chilly in the corridors. "I hope your room is not too chilly on nights like these?"

"No, I am quite cozy on the third floor. Mrs Taylor makes sure that the maids have a fire going for me in the evenings, especially the last few weeks. It would seem autumn is upon us."

Her smile was so lovely in the candlelight. He wished they did not have to say goodnight. "You are doing an excellent job with the boys, you know. I am sorry if I was severe this morning. I suppose my mother is to blame for that." He clasped his hands behind his back. "She was a caring woman, but something changed in her when my father died."

She turned at the stairwell leading up to the third floor. "I suppose being married as long as they were made that understandable. I know my mother has not been the same since my father died. Our parents were very lucky, it sounds like."

"Indeed." He smiled, enjoying the moments before she would leave for the evening. He was reluctant to let her go, searching his mind for a way to keep talking to her. He could think of nothing that would be appropriate. "Well, I suppose you are tired. Good night, Miss Steele. I had a most enjoyable day getting to know you better."

He took her hand and kissed it as if she were a lady and not just a governess. He was quickly coming to realize that she was not *just* a governess to him. She pulled back her hand, trying to release herself from his grasp. However, he did not let go until Mrs Taylor could be seen coming down the corridor.

He let his hand fall to his side and turned around. "Good night, Mrs Taylor. Miss Steele." Bowing slightly at the waist, he sauntered down the hall to his room, glancing over his shoulder as the ladies began to whisper in earnest as they made their way up the stairwell.

Once in the safety of his own room, he allowed a smile to cross his lips. He did not ring for his valet, undressing and laying the clothes out over the top of the screen. Glancing at the clock above the mantel, he realized it was much later than he had previously imagined. No wonder the boys had given no argument to going to bed. The clock struck ten as he climbed into bed, picking up the evening newspaper's business section. Usually, he read the evening newspaper after dinner, alone in the drawing room. He thought how nice it had been to spend the evening in the company of his brothers and Miss Steele. It had made him feel like a child again.

His brothers were quick-witted and hung on every word Miss Steele spoke. Matthew had been correct in his summation. Miss Steele did resemble their mother. There was a portrait of her in the study that his father had commissioned the year after they had been married. Her smile and the sparkle in her eyes were what resembled Miss Steele's the most. They both had a kind, compassionate nature and an adventurous spirit, which made her coldness after his father passed all the more gut-wrenching.

It was no wonder at all that the boys had warmed to Miss Steele so quickly. She was bright and charming and lovely. When William had suggested they read together every night, Charles' mind had screamed 'yes!' even though he had to say that that was not possible.

He folded and laid down the newspaper, unable to focus on the article he was reading. His mind was full of Miss Steele. Guilt wrapped its nasty tendrils around his mind, reminding him that he was courting another woman. It was not fair of him to be spending so much time with Miss Steele.

He went out onto his balcony, needing some fresh air. The rain had finally stopped, and the clouds had parted to reveal a beautiful full moon. He looked up into the heavens and took a deep breath. Lady Amelia would be mistress of this estate in a few short months. He

needed to turn his attention to making improvements for the house before that happened.

How he wished he could delay the inevitable. However, it would be better to get it over and done. He dreaded the notion that Miss Steele would soon find out that he was shortly to be engaged. He did not want to see how she would react. Would she be upset, feeling like he had used her? Or worse still, would her reaction show him that she did not care for him at all?

He was having trouble deciphering Miss Steele's emotions. Sometimes he thought he saw glimpses of what she was feeling. Then a dutiful mask would drop, shielding him from seeing what was going on in her mind.

He turned around, crossing his arms over his chest. He surveyed the roof for a moment. Charles would have to have it repaired in the next year or so. His eyes travelled over the windows, landing on one on the third story. A faint light was shining there, and he wondered if it was Miss Steele's room. What was she thinking about the day they had spent together? Had it been a waste of time for her? Or had she enjoyed herself as much as he had?

Padding back into the room, he closed the door and sealed it against the cool night air. He feared that he would not be getting much sleep that night, so he rang for his valet and asked if any letters had been delivered for him.

"Yes, sir. There were a few delivered before dinner, My Lord." His valet went to fetch them from the study, and Charles sat by the fire while he waited. They had taken dinner in the boys' room that night instead of going down to dinner. He was sure the footmen and the rest of the staff had enjoyed an evening off. Or at least the semblance of an evening off. He was sure the butler had found something to occupy



their time.

The valet knocked and came in with a silver tray, holding it out for him to take the letters. The first two were business correspondence and could wait until morning. But the third was a letter from Lady Amelia. "Thank you, that will be all," he said, dismissing his valet.

"Of course, sir. Good night."

Charles waited until the door was closed before he opened the letter.

He wondered how much news she could have to share since he had left London the previous day. He tried not to be annoyed with her eagerness.

*My dearest Charles,*

Charles raised an eyebrow, feeling the yearning in her words practically dripping off the page. He continued, although reluctant to do so.

*I am heartbroken that you have left London so soon after our courtship has begun. Please promise to write to me every day until we can be together again. I have had an idea that I think will be most advantageous to all of us and will allow us to see each other again very soon.*

*Have you hosted a hunting party at Hensol in the last few years? Your good friend, Lord Graham, tells me that you have not. (I received a letter*

*from the Grahams this morning, and he assures me that you have not.) You could invite some of your business associates out for a weekend, and I will play hostess. I assure you that I am a most excellent hostess.*

*I think of you every moment, Charles, and pray that my idea pleases you. Please write back as soon as you have received this and let me know your answer. Father says that he would be happy to purchase anything you may need for the party here in town and send it along with us.*

*Yours lovingly,  
Lady Amelia*

Charles folded the letter and dropped it onto the end table. "She is very sure of herself, isn't she?" he asked no one in particular. The way she had assumed he would say yes to such a party irked him – as if she were already the reigning mistress over Hensol. What would his mother have said concerning such a letter? If only she were here so that he could ask her advice.

He paced before the hearth, annoyed by the troublesome letter. The fact that she had ordered him to write back to her the moment he received it had also set his teeth on edge. He did not have time to write love letters back and forth to her every day. The very idea was childish.

Halting, he berated himself for being so cold. Amelia was young and on the brink of becoming a wife. She had always been the excitable, dramatic type. He would have to get used to her childish ways, he supposed. The notion only served to upset him more.

Huffing, he lit a candle and strode to the door. Walking down the hall, he bounded down the steps and made his way to the library. He

would find a book to take his mind off things. He went in search of *Romeo and Juliet*, hoping the boys did not have the only copy in their room. As he looked at one of the uppermost shelves, he heard the stairs creak, and someone walk into the library. He doused the light quickly, hoping that the moonlight would not give him away. He held his breath as a lone figure entered the room, the flame of the candle illuminating her face. *Miss Steele ...*

## Chapter 18

Elisabeth could not have slept that night if her life depended on it. She tossed and turned on her bed, punching her pillow to try and get comfortable. But her racing thoughts would not allow her any peace. Elisabeth had hoped that Mrs Taylor would want to chat for a while before going to her own room. However, she had walked with her up the stairs and had said goodnight to her at her bedroom door.

Disappointed and wishing for someone to talk to, she went to her writing desk. She wrote a long letter to Harriet, wishing that she could divulge the full extent of her developing feelings for Lord Hensol. She knew that her mother would most likely want to read the letter as well, as she had not had time to write that week. Harriet would read between the lines, and hopefully, her answer would hold some competent sisterly advice.

When she blew out the candle, her thoughts bombarded her even more. She replayed the events of the day over and over in her mind. Had she imagined his smiles and compliments? Was she reading into his behaviour more than she should? She had never had a beau before. She could not tell if he were simply being kind or if there was a growing attraction there.

The memory of his gentle touch as he had tucked a stray tendril of her hair behind her ear made butterflies dance in her stomach. He would not have done such a thing if he did not care for her, would he? He was not the kind of man to prey on housemaids and governesses and then discard them when no longer interested.

"This is maddening," she huffed and sat up in bed. She lit her candle and put a wrap around her shoulders. She padded down the stairs in her stocking feet, the moon illuminating the hallway better than her

candle ever could. The grandfather clock in the hall chimed eleven as she entered the library, searching for the appropriate shelf. If she remembered correctly, Shakespeare was kept near the back of the library, on one of the higher shelves ...

Elisabeth jumped when she caught a shadow move in her peripherals. She yelped as someone swung a broom at her head. She ducked, nearly dropping her candle.

"Who goes there!" the person called. They swung again with a loud *thump!*, this time coming dangerously close to Elisabeth's head.

"It's me, Elisabeth!" She held out her hand to try and ward off her attacker. The broom dropped, and Mrs Taylor came into the light, her nightcap slightly askew. Black curls escaped from the white cap, making her look even more comical. She started to laugh, holding her hand over her heart.

"You gave me such a fright, Elisabeth. What on earth are you doing down here so late?" She tried to remain sombre, but Elisabeth could tell she was smiling.

"I wanted to borrow a book!" Elisabeth breathed, her heart still beating like a thousand stampeding stallions. "You nearly clubbed me in the side of the head with your broom. And what are you doing down here so late? I didn't even hear you leave your room."

Mrs Taylor dissolved into laughter, and Elisabeth joined her. "I'm sorry, my dear girl. I came down because I thought I'd left a light burning in the study. Lord Hensol asked for his letters to be delivered to his room a little while ago. I was afraid the house would be burned down when we woke up in the morning."

Elisabeth steadied the candle, straightening. "Well, I couldn't sleep, so I came down to find a book. I'm sorry I frightened you. You frightened me more, I think."

"I'm sorry. Well, have you found a book?"

"No, I hadn't started looking yet."

"Well, I'll hold the candle while you peruse if you like." Mrs Taylor held her hand out for the candle.

"No, thank you. I think we had better go upstairs. I'll look for something in the morning if I've a mind." She started towards the door, offering to take the broom from Mrs Taylor.

"I believe I know why it is that you can't sleep," Mrs Taylor stated. She gave Elisabeth a knowing look. Elisabeth tried to be nonchalant.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Lord Hensol. Come on. I don't think I could go to sleep now, even if I wanted to. Shall we go up to your room and have a chat?"

Elisabeth licked her lips and cleared her throat. "I don't know what you mean. Why would I be unable to sleep because of Lord Hensol?"

She wrapped her shawl tighter around her shoulders to ward off the chill.

"You know why. I've seen the way you look at him. And I saw it again when he was saying goodnight to you at the stairwell. Come along." Mrs Taylor would not be dissuaded. Elisabeth let out a sigh, deciding not to deny it. Mrs Taylor would know if she were lying.

A creak sounded at the back of the library, and Elisabeth jumped. "What was that?" she whispered.

Mrs Taylor laughed. "It's an old house, Elisabeth. It creaks as much as an old man's bones. Come on, you're getting paranoid, and I'm getting cold."

They headed out of the library and back up to the third floor, doing their best to be quiet so as not to wake the boys or Lord Hensol as they passed. When they were in the safety of Elisabeth's room, Mrs Taylor began.

"I've been wanting to talk to you for a while now. I've seen the way you look at Lord Hensol." Mrs Taylor situated herself at the end of Elisabeth's bed. Elisabeth shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't think I look at him in any particular way. At least, I don't mean to ..."

"I know Lord Hensol is handsome, but he is not for you. If you know what is good for you, you will resign yourself to your place." Mrs Taylor bit her lip. "I don't say this to hurt you, you know. And it is not

because he is so much better than you." She looked as if there were more that she wanted to say. Mrs Taylor bit her lip, hesitating.

"What is it? I wish you would tell me what you're thinking, no matter how you think I will react." Elisabeth could not bear to have people keep secrets from her.

"I didn't want to be the one to tell you, for fear of how you would take it. I can see that you are becoming attached to him ..."

"But I am not, I assure you, Mrs Taylor!" Elisabeth said vehemently, saddened that she had been so obvious. She had not planned to fall in love with Lord Hensol. The thought stilled her. She was not in love with him, was she? It was only a fading attraction that would soon be gone. She knew in her mind that nothing could ever come of her feelings. However, her heart told her something entirely different. *"One cannot always follow one's heart. Even if they wish to ..."* Lord Hensol's words floated back to the forefront of her memory. Had he been trying to tell her something?

"You may not think that you are becoming attached, but I can see it as plainly as the nose on your face, Elisabeth. I don't want to see you get hurt." She took her hand and squeezed it. "I did not want to tell you this, but Lord Hensol is soon to be engaged."

Elisabeth felt like she had slapped her across the face. All the air left her lungs and a stabbing pain clenched around her heart. Her mind railed against the idea. Lord Hensol engaged?

Elisabeth had not expected that kind of reaction. She had only known Lord Hensol for a few weeks. "Engaged?" she repeated aloud.



"Yes. He is courting a young woman named Lady Amelia Wilmouth. A very fashionable debutante who resides in London with her family. The match has been planned since their infancy."

Elisabeth looked up, noting the pity shining in Mrs Taylor's eyes. She could not bear anyone to pity her. She put on a brave face, even though feeling like her heart was ripping in two. "I see. Well, that is that then." She remained silent as Mrs Taylor got up, no doubt sensing she wanted to be alone.

"I hope you know that I did not share that with you to hurt you but to protect you. I know that Lord Hensol means well and would never wish to injure your reputation. Do not hold him in too low of an opinion."

"I have the highest opinion of Lord Hensol. Today has shown me that he is a caring and generous man. His brothers are lucky to have him. And this Lady Amelia is lucky as well. I wish the best." Elisabeth's words came out flat. She wished she could have made them sound more sincere but did not have the heart.

"Good girl. I'll say goodnight now. Have a good sleep, Elisabeth." Mrs Taylor gave her a hug before leaving her room, a gesture that she appreciated. Elisabeth curled up on the edge of the bed for a moment, pulling her feet up under her.

She had not thought that she was looking at Lord Hensol in any particular way. Elisabeth had tried to be so careful to guard her behaviour. She would have to avoid him as much as possible now. Elisabeth did not want to give him the wrong impression. It was highly unprofessional of her to let her feelings show. Another thought hit her mind, upsetting her even more. What if the other members of

the staff had noticed, too? Had she and Lord Hensol become the subject of cruel gossip?

She covered her face with her hands and moaned in despair. What must they think of her? She was not trying to better herself by marrying a wealthy lord, but what if they believed that of her? Her self-consciousness overtook her, making it even harder for her to calm down and sleep.

Elisabeth blew out the candle and crawled under the covers. The moonlight poured in through her window, the thin white curtains doing little to keep out the light.

"What must he think of me?" she lamented and threw her arm over her eyes, wishing she could block out the world.

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Charles stood atop the ladder in the library, frozen until she heard the ladies' footsteps fading in the distance. He climbed down and let out a sigh, smiling from ear to ear. Miss Steele had not denied her feelings for him. His smile disappeared as he realized what that meant.

Miss Steele was going to end up hurt when she found out that he was courting Lady Amelia. He would need to tell her right away if he were to shield her from that kind of pain. He did not want to tell her but knew it had to be done.

He walked back to his room, his shoulders hunched in abject discontent. If only he had met Elisabeth sooner! He berated himself

again for asking Lady Amelia to enter into a courtship. Raking a hand through his hair, he opened the door to his bedroom and did his best not to slam it. It would do no good to take his frustration out on the door jamb. He paced for another hour, trying to find a way out of his predicament. However, he was stuck in the middle of two women, two different lifestyles. He could not break his word to one, and he could not lead the other on. Charles would have to choose his course carefully. He thought of what Amelia would say if she ever found out he was falling for another woman. Imagining her face growing red with rage, he shook his head and pushed the image aside. "She can never know ..."

## Chapter 19

Over the next few days, Charles noticed Miss Steele's behaviour shift towards him. She was no longer open with him and rarely smiled. Anytime he went to visit the schoolroom, she found a way to leave him alone with the boys. She would not look him in the eye. He wanted to ask her what was wrong but knew that would be inappropriate. Even the boys had begun to notice.

"Is Miss Steele ill, Charles?" William asked as she excused herself during one of his visits for the third day in a row. He looked at the closed door she had just exited through and shook his head.

"I don't know. Why, does she seem ill?"

"Not ill, per say. Just different. Not happy." William shrugged his shoulders as he tried to explain the change in their governess.

"We like the old Miss Steele better. The one who smiles all the time and takes us outside," Matthew stated. "We've been cooped up inside for the last three days. Usually, she will take us for a walk after our luncheon for a little break before we come back inside and do our arithmetic lessons."

Charles thought for a moment. "Perhaps we all need some fresh air. Would you boys like to come with me to visit a few of the tenants?" Miss Steele opened the door then and walked back into the classroom. No doubt, she had been expecting him to be gone by now. She halted at the door, seeming to contemplate whether she should leave again or stay. She opted to stay, walking briskly towards her desk. She set down a few books and sat down.

"Oh, that is a wonderful idea! May we go, Miss Steele?" William and Matthew both bounded over to the desk, pleading with Miss Steele.

"It is not my decision to make, Master William. I defer to Lord Hensol's judgement," she said flatly. She gave him a curious look, her eyes cold. Elisabeth then returned her attention to the papers she was grading.

"Won't you come with us, Miss Steele? It is a lovely day." Charles approached the desk, afraid that she was angry with him for some unknown reason.

She glanced up at him, bouncing her eyes away from his gaze. "I have things I need to do to prepare for tomorrow's lessons. The boys have worked diligently today. They deserve a walk in the sunshine."

The boys bounded out of the room and went to retrieve their coats. They could hear them rummaging around in the next room, shouting with glee at the prospect of getting out of the house. Charles stood with his hands in his jacket pockets. "You don't deserve a walk in the sunshine? You've worked just as hard as the boys, if not harder as you are the teacher. Come with us, please. They'll enjoy it so much more if you do."

"I doubt that, My Lord. I am just the governess." Her voice was so cold, and her eyes held the betrayal he had feared they would when he finally got up the courage to tell her about Amelia. Had someone already told her the news? He cleared his throat.

"You are not just ..." he began. The boys came back in, though, stopping the words before he could say them.

"Miss Steele? Aren't you coming?" Matthew asked, frowning slightly when he saw that she did not have her cloak.

"No, I think I shall stay behind today. You two enjoy yourselves." She smiled down at them, all traces of the iciness gone.

After much pleading and cajoling, the boys finally succeeded in convincing her to come along. She reluctantly retrieved her cloak from the peg and wrapped it around her shoulders. She followed the boys down the stairs, keeping a safe distance behind as they walked down the lane and out of the gate. Miss Steele said very little unless the boys asked her a question. They named the different types of trees that dotted the landscape, looking back at Miss Steele for approval.

She always had a kind and encouraging word for them, even when they answered incorrectly. He wished that they could have a moment to talk. Her behaviour was starting to worry him. When they came to the first tenant, he chatted with the farmer while the boys looked at the pigs eating away in the pen. Miss Steele waited a few yards off, looking bored and uncomfortable.

On the way to the next tenant, he wondered if it had been a mistake to invite her along. She looked utterly miserable. Perhaps it was for the best that she was distancing herself from him. She was no longer that warm and delightful young woman he had seen a few nights prior as they'd read together in the boys' room. She was the professional, distant governess who had been put in her place. He wondered if Mrs Taylor had had anything to do with her change in heart.

When they reached the second tenant, the boys wanted to be right by his side. It would be good for them to know how the estate was run. If anything ever happened to him before he had a son, William would take the reins, perish the thought. He could not bear to think of the boys losing another guardian.

Miss Steele walked a few yards behind them on the way home. The boys were eagerly asking questions about the different animals. When they came to the gates leading into Hensol, she begged his pardon and asked if she could have a word. "I wonder if I might take a few hours before dinner and go to see my sister? My family lives a few miles away, and I should be back before the boys' dinner."

"Of course, Miss Steele. But you should take a horse in case it decides to rain. I shall speak to the stablekeeper myself." He started towards the stable, thinking that she would follow.

"No, thank you, Lord Hensol. I am perfectly happy to walk." She looked as if she were about to cry, and he felt gutted at the thought that he might be the cause somehow.

"Nonsense. If it is a few miles, you will only have a little while to visit your sister. Please, take a horse, and you will get there much faster and thus have more time to visit your family." His words seemed to distress her even more, however, instead of soothing her.

"Please, sir. I wish to walk. I am very fond of walking." She backed away from him. "Have I your permission to go?"

"Of course, Miss Steele, if that is what you wish."

"Thank you, sir." She turned hastily and walked hurried down the lane, disappearing from sight as she rounded the bend. He watched

her go, feeling guilty for the wedge that had been brought between them. He was sure now that she had already found out about him and Amelia.

William came up beside him and took his hand. Matthew came up on the opposite side and did the same, joining him as he watched Miss Steele disappear. "Where is Miss Steele going?"

"She went home to visit her family." Charles turned them towards the house, and they walked on in silence for a moment. When Matthew broke the silence, Charles felt his heart twist.

"I wish Miss Steele would find a husband. I think she is sad that she doesn't have any children of her own." Matthew kicked a rock as they walked up the drive.

"What makes you say that?"

"Aren't all women sad if they don't have children? I think all women should have children to care for. It is what they were created for, isn't it?" Matthew asked innocently. "Eve was created as the first mother in the history of the world, and Miss Steele says that women were made to be men's helpmates."

Charles smiled at Matthew's childlike faith. "Yes, that is true, I suppose."

"Charles? What is a helpmate?"



"Well, it means that women are there to help their husbands."

"Like a servant?" William chimed in.

"No. I think God meant it to be more like a partnership. Do you know what that means?"

"I think so. You mean that husbands and wives are supposed to work together?"

"Precisely," Charles said. The boys let go of his hands and ran up in front of him. His father and mother had had that kind of relationship. It was what he longed for in a relationship with his future wife. However, the more he pictured his life with Amelia, the more he felt that that would not be the case between them.

Guilt washed over him. He had still not answered Amelia's letter. Every time he had thought of writing a reply, he could not find the words. He had crumpled several renditions, one in which he told her that he would not be dictated to as to when he would write to her. Of course, he could not send that kind of response to her. Her father was a vital man who could make a lot of trouble for him if things went south with Amelia. He had a feeling she would urge her father to do just that if he broke off their courtship. Amelia had a jealous nature, and he sensed a slightly vindictive bent to go along with it. If he made a fool of her, she would take pleasure in bringing him down.

There was nothing to be done about it now. Miss Steele would not talk to him, and Amelia was waiting. He needed to focus on his courtship with her and think about marriage. He knew that his mother had been right about securing the Talbot family at Hensol. He did not want to

wait until he was a middle-aged man to marry, as his father had done. He wanted to be there to watch his children grow up.

He set his jaw as they neared the house, knowing that he would have to put his heart aside and do what was best for the family. The Talbot name would only be strengthened with the Wilmouth family coming alongside it. It was, after all, his duty.

## Chapter 20

Elisabeth returned from her visit with Harriet feeling only slightly better. For a young girl, she was wise beyond her years. When Elisabeth had told her sister of her deepening feelings for Lord Hensol, Harriet had taken her hand and told her to let him go. “It is not worth the heartache, falling in love with a man you cannot have.”

“You sound like you have experience with such a thing.” Elisabeth had tried to laugh, to keep the mood light. However, Harriet’s gaze held a fathom of pain, which she had chosen not to divulge.

“A lot happened while you were away at school,” was all she offered. Instead of allowing Elisabeth to question her further, she went on about her relationship with Lord Hensol. Or rather, her non-existent relationship, for it could never be.

When she entered the foyer, the boys were waiting for her and began speaking more rapidly than she could keep up with. “Wait a moment, please,” she said with a laugh. “I cannot understand a word either of you are saying.”

They each took a breath, and William began again, trying to slow down and explain in his excitement. “We want to put on a play for Charles. Do you remember the story you told us to write, the one about the dragon and maiden? Well, we made it into a play. It is jolly good if you ask me!”

Lord Hensol came out of his study to see what all the commotion was about. “Are you boys bothering Miss Steele? Give her a chance to catch her breath; she is just arriving home.” He wore a smile, though,

seemingly in a good mood. Elisabeth noted how handsome he was when he smiled and caught herself gazing at him. She lowered her gaze, turning her attention back to the boys.

“I think it is wonderful that you have adapted your story into a play. However, you must ask your brother if you might put it on for him.” Elisabeth did not meet his gaze, too afraid of what her own would give away.

“A play? For me? How thoughtful of you, boys. How about we set up the library, and you can act it out for me after dinner?” She ventured to glance at Lord Hensol then and felt her heart skip a beat when she realized he was studying her.

“I will help you set it up before I retire this evening,” Elisabeth said and held out her hands for the boys.

Matthew stepped back, frowning slightly. “No, you have to act it out with us. You have to be the maiden. William is the dragon, and I am the narrator.”

William elbowed Matthew and shushed him. “Do not give away the whole story, Matty,” he whispered harshly.

“Never mind. I will go back to work so you three may plan out your roles. I wish you the best of luck, Miss Steele.” His eyes twinkled with mischief and amusement, making her heart twist. Elisabeth watched him go back into his study, wishing for the hundredth time that day that she had never taken this job. Maybe then her heart would not ache as it did. Harriet’s advice sounded again, echoing through her mind. If only it were as easy to hear good advice as it was to follow.

"I do not know if I should act in your play, boys. You can switch roles back and forth when needed. I do not belong ..."

"No!" they both said in unison. "It will not be as good if Matty plays the girl! Please help us, Miss Steele," William pleaded. Both boys clasped their hands together as if in prayer, their eyes beseeching. Elisabeth could not hold out against such supplications and soon gave into them.

"Very well. We have a lot to do if we are to be ready before dinner. Where is my script?" Elisabeth smiled as the boys jumped up and down in their excitement.

"First, we need to set up the library. We have some old blankets in our room we can use as curtains." William took Elisabeth's hand and nearly dragged her down the hall and up to the playroom. He handed her a few sheets of paper, on which were written her lines. "You can study those while we're eating dinner."

"Yes, sir!" Elisabeth saluted. They gathered blankets and went down to the library. They worked quickly as the sun set, hanging the blankets between two bookshelves. The aisle would be centre stage, and then they would come out to the open seating area to act out their dialogue. William turned one of the chairs around from the seating area before the hearth. "Charles can sit here." He placed it directly in front of centre stage, leaving plenty of room for them to act out the fight scene.

"It looks good, boys. Now I think you should go and wash up for dinner. I will see you afterward." She sent the boys off to their room to wash and change and then headed out into the hall. Lord Hensol came out of his study when he heard her coming. She jumped when

she saw him.

“I am sorry if I startled you,” he began. “I hope you are not too tired to do this with the boys. I should have realized you would need some rest after walking to and from home.”

“Not at all. It has bolstered my spirits to see them. And I cannot refuse the boys anything, especially when they have adapted one of their assignments into a play.”

Lord Hensol stepped closer and took on a conspiratorial sort of tone. “What is it about?” His eyes danced, and she felt herself getting lost again. She shook her head and lowered her gaze.

“You will have to wait and find out, My Lord. I will not spoil it for you.” Elisabeth did not want to tell him that it was an allegory, centring around her as the maiden and him as the dragon. Hopefully, the meaning would be lost on him, thinking it was only a lovely fairytale. “I should go and study my lines. William is quite the demanding director.” She held up the pages and smiled. Lord Hensol chuckled, but instead of going back into his study, he walked alongside her down the hall.

“Well, I am eager to see your acting skills, Miss Steele. Will you take dinner with us this evening?” She stepped onto the first step and halted, shocked by the invitation. Words escaped her for a moment as he rested his foot on the first step, leaning dangerously close. She thought for a moment that he would take her hand. She gripped the script, holding it close to her chest.

“No, thank you, sir. I will take my meal in the schoolroom, as is customary.”

“Are you sure? This is a special circumstance. Perhaps you and the boys would like to run your lines together?”

She shook her head again and backed up the steps, wishing that she could flee. His nearness upended her every time. “No, thank you. I would not want to give away the plot.” She hurried up the stairs, leaving him alone. She could feel his eyes on her back, watching her as she left. She closed her eyes against the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.

Instead of going into the schoolroom where her dinner tray was undoubtedly waiting, she went up to her room. She dropped the script onto her bed and began to pace, wondering if there were any way to get out of doing the play. She could pretend that she was ill, perhaps. However, she did not want to ruin the play for the boys. They were so looking forward to it. Plopping down on the squeaky bed, she covered her face with her hands. Why was Lord Hensol making it so difficult for her to remain professional?

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Elisabeth had grown increasingly nervous as the hour drew closer for her to go downstairs. Lord Hensol usually finished dinner around nine o'clock. However, since the boys were dining with him that evening, he would not retire to the drawing-room for his glass of Port and to smoke his pipe. She need not have worried about being late, though, for the boys came crashing into the room at half-past eight and told her it was time.

“We are ready! Charles is getting a drink, and then we will start. Come on!” Elisabeth was pulled to her feet, her half-eaten dinner tray left on

the desk. She had been too nervous to eat much of anything.

“Please, slow down, boys.” Elisabeth pulled her hands free, and the boys did as she said. Matty handed her a shawl and told her to tie it around her head with a bit of string he had found.

“Here, tie this on your head. The maiden has to have a veil.”

Elisabeth did as instructed, and when they came to the library door, they called out for Lord Hensol to close his eyes. He did as he was told, and they sneaked into the library and hid behind the makeshift curtain.

Matthew went out and stood in front of Lord Hensol, clearing his throat. “You can open your eyes now, audience,” he whispered.

Elisabeth peeked around the curtain, watching as Lord Hensol opened his eyes and smiled up at Matthew. “The audience is ready,” he replied. He raised his glass of Port and took a sip as Matthew began the introduction.

Matthew held up several pages of his script and began to narrate the opening scene. “Once upon a time, there was a boy who lost his family. They died of the plague, leaving only him alone to run the farm. One day, an old hag came to the farm and asked the boy for some bread and a place to sleep for the night, but the boy said no. He chased the old woman away, throwing rocks at her. He was so angry that his family was gone that he became angry and mean.

The old woman hobbled away, but as they came to the outskirts of the



town, she turned back on the boy and cast a spell on him.” Matthew cupped the side of his mouth and whispered to Lord Hensol, “The old hag was really a sorceress.”

Lord Hensol raised his eyebrows and nodded. “Oh, I see. How very interesting.”

William shushed his older brother from behind the curtain, “No talking in the audience!”

Lord Hensol chuckled, “I beg your pardon. Continue, good sir.”

Matthew continued to set the scene. “The old hag turned the boy into a dragon, saying that he would only turn back into a boy when he learned to be nice to people. His curse would only be broken when he found a beautiful young maiden to marry him.”

Matthew bowed and hurried back behind the curtain. It was Elisabeth’s turn to go out, and she took a deep breath before going out in front of Lord Hensol. Reading from her script, she chanced a cursory glance at Lord Hensol. He was watching her intently. She had expected to see his eyes filled with boredom, but instead, he seemed to be engrossed in the story.

Clearing her throat, she began. “I am a fair maiden, walking down the road on my way to the market. Oh, how I wish I had a husband to protect me! I hear there are dragons about!”

William jumped out from behind the curtain and roared. “I am the dragon! You look like a tasty snack. I will capture you and take you to

my lair!" William grabbed her wrist, and she let out a fake scream.

"Oh no, dragon. Please! I have a family!" But the dragon would not listen and quickly whisked her off behind the curtain.

Throughout the play, Elisabeth could see that Lord Hensol was genuinely enjoying himself. He laughed and applauded at all the right places, cheering encouragement as the plot unfolded. If he had deduced that the play was about him, he had not let on.

As the play came to an end, Lord Hensol quieted as the dragon was changed back into a man. William kissed Elisabeth on the cheek, and they held hands as they made their way back to the family farm.

"And that goes to show that love is greater than hate!" Matthew narrated. "The end!"

Lord Hensol applauded as the three of them came out from behind the curtain and took their bows. "Bravo! Bravo!" he called, beaming at them. Lord Hensol came up to them on the makeshift stage and congratulated the players. "Bravo, Miss Steele. You make an excellent 'beautiful maiden'." She felt the heat rise in her cheeks and turned to start taking down the curtains.

"It was William and Matthew's brilliant writing that made it so wonderful, not me."

Lord Hensol said nothing but turned to the boys and instructed them that it was time for bed. She hoped that he would leave the library with them, allowing her to clean up in peace. She wanted nothing

more than to be left alone with her thoughts, for his looks throughout the play told her he felt more for her than he was trying to let on. “Goodnight, boys. I will see you in the morning,” she said as they gathered their costumes. She then turned away, hoping that Lord Hensol would follow them and leave her be.

## Chapter 21

The hall clock struck ten, and Charles clasped his hands together after sending the boys up to their room. "That was stupendous." He could feel the tension emanating from every fibre of her being, and he wished he could do something to ease her discomfort. "You are quite the actress, Miss Steele."

She laughed nervously. "You exaggerate. But I thank you for the compliment just the same." She climbed the first few rungs of one of the ladders and started to take down the blanket.

"Here, hand it to me," he instructed, standing under the ladder.

"You do not have to help me, sir. You should not have to clean this up," she replied, stubbornly holding onto the blanket. She started to climb down with the bundle in her arms, switching her arms back and forth as she did to try and keep her balance.

He stepped onto the bottom rung and held out his arm for the heavy quilt. "Come, now, Miss Steele. I am not averse to helping. Please, hand me the blanket, and I will start to fold it up."

She pursed her lips and handed it down reluctantly. For the briefest moment, their fingers touched, and he felt something akin to a bolt of lightning pass through his chest. He halted, gazing up into her bright blue eyes. Why did she have to be so beautiful?

Miss Steele came down from the ladder and went around to the other

bookshelf, taking down the corners of the other blankets. She let them fall to the floor this time instead of handing them to him.

"I have a feeling that play had a deeper meaning than just a dragon capturing a beautiful young maiden. Am I correct?"

Elisabeth teetered on the ladder, and he rushed to her side. "Careful." He held a hand up to her to help her down, but she would not take it. "Come now, Miss Steele. What is the meaning of the play?"

Elisabeth would not look at him but started folding blankets instead. It was an arduous task since the quilt was long and heavy. "I would rather not say, My Lord," she said, a little above a whisper. Charles already had an inkling but had wanted to hear it from her mouth. "It is about me, is it not? I am the dragon."

Her head snapped up, and he nearly laughed at the look on her face. "You did not think me so perceptive, did you?"

"It is not that, My Lord. Of course, not ..."

"Do not worry. I am not offended. I know the boys see me as a strict master, but they know that I love them." She seemed to ease at this statement. "What I am most curious to know is, who is the young maiden in the story?"

He watched her shoulders tense again and was sorry that he had asked the question. He moved closer to her and placed his blanket in a pile on one of the lounge chairs. She continued folding, not taking her eyes off the task. "Come now, Miss Steele. Satisfy my curiosity."

"I would suggest you ask your brothers, My Lord." She placed her blanket on the pile and moved to take down the last blanket.

"Wait. Would you mind helping me?" Charles held another thick quilt, and she nodded silently. Taking the opposite corners, she moved to give them into his waiting hands. His heart raced at the thought of reaching out and gathering her into his arms. Oh, how he wanted to, but decorum stayed his hand. "You have done a wonderful job with the boys, I must say, Miss Steele. Their moods have improved beyond recognition, and they seem to be learning so much from you. I know you did not believe me when you first came, but a strong hand and stern discipline has made all the difference."

She looked away, something akin to guilt passing through her gaze. Or was it embarrassment? She went to take down the last blanket, pushing a wooden stool up to the bookshelf. He placed the folded blanket on the pile of others and went to assist her, but she again refused.

"I can do it," she said and stood up on her tiptoes. However, as she did so, the stool wobbled, and she started to fall.

"Careful, Miss Steele!" He rushed to her side and caught her before she crashed to the floor. She wrapped her arms around his neck, gasping. He let out a laugh, losing his balance for a moment. They both fell to the floor, his arms still wrapped around her waist. She let out a laugh as well, which was like music to his ears. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I am fine; thank you." She looked up into his eyes, and he thought how lovely it would feel to lean down and kiss her. She let her arms fall from around his neck, resting her hands on his chest. He

could feel her tense as he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Pushing herself away from him, she cleared her throat and stood. She smoothed her dress and looked away from him. "I am sorry ... I did not mean ..." He scrambled to his feet and reached for her, but she quickly backed away. She stared at his chest instead of meeting his gaze, her eyes cold. "Goodnight, My Lord," she said flatly and rushed out of the room.

"Miss Steele ... Elisabeth, please wait!" He followed her out into the hall, wishing that he could talk to her. She did not stop but ran up the stairs, her feet pounding against the wood. "You fool!" he berated himself, turning back to the dark library. He raked a hand through his hair and paced in front of the shelves.

He had not meant things to get so out of hand. He should never have stayed behind with her, putting Elisabeth in such a precarious position. Her honour and reputation were worth more than his feelings. Charles could not seem to think straight when he was around her, though. Not that it was her fault. He had let his emotions run away with him – first, by her beauty, then by the hidden meaning of the play. It had not taken him long to see that the boys had centred the plot around him as the dragon and Miss Steele as the maiden who changed his heart. Perhaps she had changed his heart?

Charles went to the stool and took down the last blanket. Remembering how he had caught her, his arms ached to hold her again. His body warmed at the thought of what he had almost done. Kissing her would have been heaven for him, but he knew it would not have been fair to her. He was practically engaged to another woman.

He folded the blanket sloppily and placed it on the pile, leaving it for the maids to clear in the morning. He took the last candle out of the room and made his way upstairs. When he got to his room, he dismissed his valet. He did not want to be around anyone, save the one person he could not call on.

"What did you think would happen, you fool?" he berated himself aloud once his valet had gone. "She would never see you as anything but her stern employer." Her change in behaviour towards him was the most puzzling of all. She had seemed to warm to him over the last few days, and then suddenly, the icy chill was back. Sometimes he could see her mask of decorum slipping away, revealing the real Miss Steele. She was a lively young woman, full of joy and passion. She was adventurous and courageous, and at the same time, compassionate for the feelings of others. It was a rare combination to come across.

"This is not helping," he growled, cursing that his thoughts were always filled with her. He was not going to move on if he did not change that. How could he? She was all he thought about during the day when he should be focused on the work that needed to be done around the estate. And she was what haunted his dreams at night, like a beautiful ghost floating just beyond his reach.

Moving to his writing desk, he saw the unanswered letter from Amelia. Guilt pricked at his conscious once again, and he let out a breath as he was seated. Taking out a quill and the inkwell, he decided to get it over with.

*My dear Amelia,*

*I apologize that it has taken me so long to reply to your letter. Believe me, it was not consciously done. I have been working diligently to winterize the manor and be sure that it is ready for visitors. I would be happy to host a hunting party as soon as you deem proper. Please let me know the week that will best fit your schedule, and I will send out the appropriate invitations. Please give my best to your parents and sister, and extend my most warm salutations.*



*I regret that I am not able to write to you every day, as you requested. Alas, business keeps me much from the house, touring the grounds, and seeing to the demands of my tenants. You will find that being mistress of Hensol Manor will leave you much alone. However, I know you are equal to the task of running such a home ...*

Charles halted, wondering if he should leave the last part out. After all, they were not officially engaged yet, and a part of him dared to hope that he would not have to go through with it. He huffed, pulling out a clean piece of paper and copied the letter again, this time leaving off the part about her becoming mistress of Hensol. No matter how hard he tried, he could not see anyone else as mistress of the house besides Elisabeth. "Why must you torment me so!" he breathed in frustration.

He left the letter on his desk, unsigned. It seemed to mock him from its resting place, accusing him of unfaithfulness until it seemed to fill the air with silent censure. Walking away from the writing desk, he paced near the hearth like a caged tiger. His mother's last words rang in his mind, *"It is your duty, son ..."*

What of his heart? Was duty all there was to life? Surely, she had not meant him to live a miserable existence with a woman he did not love? Shaking his head, he doubted she would have taken love into consideration. *Emotion fades, son. Duty will see you through the storms of life regardless of what you feel.*

Standing, he moved back over to the desk. He crumpled the first version of the letter and then signed the second. He then folded it and sealed it with his crest. Duty must be the reigning factor in his life from now on.

## Chapter 22

Elisabeth did not stop until she reached the safety of her room. She closed the door, resting her back against the hardwood, breathing deeply to try and calm her racing heartbeat. She should have left the library with the boys instead of staying to clean up. Elisabeth had no idea that Lord Hensol would stay and help her, though. It was beneath him to clean up, especially with a litany of servants to do everything for him.

Guilt washed over her. He had attributed her success with the boys to a 'strict schedule and stern discipline.' She had been lying to him all along, going behind his back to do things her own way. It had been simple while he had been away. However, now she would have to change how she taught to retain her position.

How could she disappoint the boys, though? They loved their lessons, and she knew it was because she allowed them the freedom to use the imagination. She only hoped that Lord Hensol would not get wind of what she had been doing.

Lord Hensol was a conundrum. At times, he was stern and commanding. However, tonight in the library, he had been fun-loving and tender. Which was the real Lord Hensol? Perhaps they were both opposite sides of the same coin? You could not have one without the other, both making up the man that was Charles Talbot.

His touch had made her stomach do flip-flops. Why was he teasing her so when she knew he was promised to another woman? Was he having second thoughts? Even so, it was cruel of him to play on her emotions, only to dash her hopes. For she knew that he would shatter any hopes he had built up in her, whether he had meant to or not. Did he know how she felt about him? She had tried to be so careful since

her talk with Mrs Taylor, keeping a professional distance between them. Or at least, she was trying. Lord Hensol was not making it easy for her – for either of them.

A knock sounded at the door, and she went to answer it. Mrs Taylor stood outside, holding a letter out to her. "This was just delivered at the gate, by your brother, I believe."

"My brother? Please come in." Elisabeth motioned for her to join her.

"No, I do not want to impose."

"Please, I beg of you. It can only mean urgent news if my brother brought a note so late. Sit with me while I read it." Elisabeth closed the door after Mrs Taylor entered, seating herself at the writing desk.

Elisabeth opened the letter and read the hurried words written in her mother's hand.

*My dearest Elisabeth,*

*It is with a heavy heart that I inform you that our John is taken ill. We have sent for the doctor, as his fever has cast him into delirium. It seems that the fever is spreading through the local children at an alarming rate. I fear for your younger siblings and that I will be left destitute and bereaved of my children. Please send funds as soon as you can, for I fear I do not have what is needed to pay the good physician.*

*If you are able, please come and see us soon.*

*Your loving mother ...*

"Bad news?" Mrs Taylor asked, seeing the look on her face. Elisabeth sank down on the bed, letting the missive fall to the floor.

"It is my brother, John. He has come down with a fever. I thought he was not acting himself earlier today when I went to see them. He is usually lively, but today he only sat by the window curled up with a blanket. I tried to tell Mother that he must not be feeling well, but she waved it off to the inclement weather we have been experiencing of late." She should have followed her instincts and sent for a doctor immediately –hang the expense.

"How old is John?"

"He is nine. Tom is the one who delivered the note. He is twelve and very capable for a boy of his age. He will have run for the doctor after delivering this note." Elisabeth bent and picked up the note from the floor. She felt even guiltier now. She could not afford to lose this job with her brother ill. Who knew how long the fever would last.

Fear gripped her heart at the thought of losing her brother. She pushed the idea aside, unable to bear the thought of another death in the family so soon after her father's passing. Her mother would not survive losing a child.

"I am sure he will recover soon, Elisabeth. Please try not to worry." Mrs Taylor patted her hand, sensing her anxiety.

"I know. We have all weathered fevers and colds now and again. I am sure you are right and that he will recover soon." Elisabeth tried to put on a brave face but was worried all the same. For her mother to write to her and have it delivered at this hour marked how serious she thought it was.

"There is something else troubling you. I can tell. Will you not confide in me, Elisabeth?" Mrs Taylor watched her pacing, the lines furrowing her brow. Elisabeth came to a standstill. Was she so easy to read? She twisted her hands and tried to smile.

"No. Why would you ask that?" Elisabeth forced herself to sit down on the bed and stop pacing. Mrs Taylor was not convinced, she could see.

"Do not shield the truth from me. What is troubling you? I want to help if I can."

Elisabeth chewed her bottom lip for a moment, wondering if she should tell Mrs Taylor about her encounter with Lord Hensol. It was embarrassing, to say the least. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks, Mrs Taylor raising her eyebrows at her long silence. "Lord Hensol stayed behind to help me clean up the library after the play. I did not ask for his help, but he stayed anyway." She halted, unable to say the words burning at the edge of her tongue. "He guessed that the play was about him ... and me."

Mrs Taylor nodded in recognition of what that would mean.

"I did not ask the boys to write about their brother; I swear it. And I

most certainly did not want to be in it, either. For some reason, they imagine that Lord Hensol has feelings for me, and I for him." Elisabeth let out a frustrated breath. "I took your advice and have tried to distance myself from him. However, he seemed to want to spend even more time with the boys – and thus with me. What shall I do, Mrs Taylor?"

Mrs Taylor did not speak for several seconds, studying Elisabeth's face. "If I were in your situation, I would start looking for a new position."

Elisabeth stilled, her eyes wide with fear. "Are you sacking me, Mrs Taylor?"

"Of course not. I am saying it might be wise to look for a new position, and then when you have found one, give Lord Hensol your notice. Your presence here has obviously become quite uncomfortable. When he brings home his new bride, it will be even more so. He does not need to be distracted in his new marriage." Elisabeth could see that Mrs Taylor understood her predicament.

"Leave William and Matthew? I just got here ..."

"They will be fine, Elisabeth. They are both due to go off to school in the next couple of years, and you will have to look for another position anyway. Is it worth damaging your reputation? Or Lord Hensol's?" Mrs Taylor stood, moving towards the door. "Think about it. That is all I ask. I do not want to see you hurt, my young friend. Take it from someone who knows."

Elisabeth searched her face as if the answers to her many questions lay there. Mrs Taylor's expression did not budge, however. She would not be divulging any secrets about her past. "I will think on it," she promised. She did not want to make a decision of this magnitude, not when her emotions were roiling. The very thought of leaving William

and Matthew grieved her. She had grown to care for the boys as if they were her own brothers. Of course, it would be inappropriate to admit such a thing to Mrs Taylor or Lord Hensol.

"Good. Now, I shall say goodnight. I am sorry you find yourself in this position. Many a young beauty has found herself in much the same position, I am sad to say." She then walked out the door and closed it softly behind her.

Mrs Taylor's words stung, even though Elisabeth knew she did not mean to hurt her. Her comment made her feel that she was to blame for the whole situation when it was actually Lord Hensol's doing. What would Mrs Taylor have said if Elisabeth had told her about him holding her in his arms? Or about tucking her hair behind her ear. Or worse still, the look he had given her.

Elisabeth had not had any experience with kisses. However, she imagined that was what he had been longing to do. She could not lie to herself, though, and say it was all his doing. If he had kissed her, she doubted she would have fought very hard to dissuade him.

"You have landed in the fire now, Elisabeth," she said to herself. She did not have the time nor the inclination to look for another job. Elisabeth would have to be even more careful now with how she taught the boys, especially when Lord Hensol was around. However, there were rumours that he would be travelling to town again soon. He would be off to see Lady Amelia, presumably. The thought sent a shock of pain through her chest. Why had she gone and fallen in love with an earl? There was nothing to be done, no way they would ever be together. She slumped down at her writing desk and started a response to her mother.

*Dearest Mother,*

*I am sorry to hear about John and send my deepest regrets that he is ill. Tell him I pray for him and will come to see him as soon as I can. As for my position, you may rest at ease, knowing that I will do all I can to stay on good terms with Lord Hensol. I am not due my sum until the end of the quarter, which you already know. Perhaps the good doctor will allow us to recompense him in other ways, such as extra laundry. I would be most happy to help when my duties are concluded in the evenings. I will speak with Mrs Taylor about it and see if I might travel home in the evenings to help you.*

*How is Harriet getting on? I so want her to finish her schooling. When the time is right, I am sure I can help her find a good position as a governess.*

*Do try to keep up your good spirits, Mother. John depends on you so, and if you seem anxious, he will worry all the more instead of resting. He is so like Father in that way.*

*As I always, I send my prayers and love.*

*Your daughter,*

*Elisabeth*

Elisabeth blotted, folded, and sealed the letter, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders so she could take the missive down to the butler. When she stepped outside, she saw a few pound notes lying on the floor. A piece of paper was wrapped around the small bundle. She picked it up and read: *For John's doctor*. The message was not signed, but she guessed who had placed it there. "Mrs Taylor, you are a wonder ..."



## Chapter 23

Over the next few days, Charles avoided seeing the boys in the schoolroom, too afraid of what he would see in Elisabeth's eyes. Did she despise him? Or did she feel for him as he did for her? Not knowing was better than this tormenting uncertainty.

He instead opted to take the boys for walks in the garden during their breaks and after their lessons were over. Charles did not invite Miss Steele, despite the boys' pleadings. It was on the third day when William decided to ask him why Miss Steele was no longer allowed on their walks.

"Are you angry with Miss Steele, Charles?" Matthew asked on one such walk.

Charles looked down at him and gave a soft chuckle. "Of course not. Why would I be angry with her?"

"Then why does she not come on our walks anymore?" William asked as he climbed up on the garden wall and walked beside Charles, balancing as he hopped from stone to stone.

"Miss Steele is very busy with teaching you boys all day long. Besides, you take your meals with her, and she puts you to bed. She deserves some time to herself." Charles could not admit to them that he missed her presence. It was a hopeless situation that would not be made any easier by spending his free time in her company. Besides, he would be surprised if she ever wanted to speak to him again, outside discussing the boys' education.

"Come now, boys. Before Miss Steele came, you longed for any chance to get out of the schoolroom and away from your governesses." Charles was trying not to take his frustration out on them. However, they frequently talked about Miss Steele, making it even more difficult for him to forget her. "I wanted to take this walk with you boys to let you know that I have to go up to London for a few more days."

"Again? For how long this time?" Matthew asked, a pout playing at his lips.

"Only a few days this time. And when I return, I shall not be alone. We are going to host a house party for a few of my friends from town. How does that sound?"

"Will Miss Steele be allowed to come to the party?" William asked and jumped down from the wall.

Charles tried to dodge the question. "I will need you both to be on your best behaviour while I am gone. I do not want to hear of you giving Miss Steele any trouble. Now, come along, we should return to the house."

The boys followed him without argument, shocking him. He was reminded again how wonderful Miss Steele's presence had been for the boys. They seemed to revere her as a second mother rather than a governess. He walked the boys up to the schoolroom and chanced a glance at Miss Steele. Sitting by the window at her desk, the sunlight illuminated the tendrils of her hair, making her look almost angelic. She stood when she saw him at the doorway and came to greet him and the boys.

"May I have a word, Miss Steele?" Charles asked, watching her tense.

"Of course, sir. Boys, sit down and begin the sums I have on the board for you," she instructed and joined him in the hallway. "How may I help, My Lord?"

Charles cleared his throat, feeling awkward. "I wanted to let you know that I will be away for the next few days. Please let Mrs Taylor know if you need any supplies, and I will pick them up while I am in town."

"That is very kind, sir, but I do not think we require anything." She would not look at him, his heart twisting. He wanted to see her bright blue eyes once more before he left for town.

"Very well. Well, umm, goodbye, Miss Steele. I have instructed the boys to mind you in all things. Please let me know if they give you any trouble, and I will deal with it when I return."

"The boys are never any trouble, My Lord." She did chance a glance at him then, her eyes filled with unshed tears. What had he said wrong? He wished he could reach out and take her in his arms, wipe her tears away. Instead, he cleared his throat once more and took a step away.

"Of course, well, good. I will let you get back to your lessons. Goodbye, Miss Steele."

"Goodbye, sir." She went back into the classroom and closed the door, the chasm between them growing even wider. Turning to leave, he bounded down the steps and out to the waiting carriage.

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Charles arrived in London late that night and slept in quite late the next day. He then thought it wise to go around and see Amelia. It was what any love-sick man would do, and she would appreciate that she had been the first visit he made.

He was shown into the parlour and greeted by Amelia and her mother, her sister standing silently off to the side. "How good of you to come and see us, Lord Hensol. I hope you are well?" Amelia's mother asked and motioned to a chair.

"Thank you, Lady Witmouth. I am well. I trust you have all been well during my absence?" Charles asked, feeling as if he were listening to himself from somewhere far away. Even as he visited with Lady Witmouth and her daughters for the next hour, his mind was back at Hensol.

"Have you given any more thought to hosting a house party, Lord Charles?" Amelia asked as the visit was coming to a close.

Charles nodded. "I have. I thought that this next week would be a good time to hold a house party. What think you?"

Amelia's face lit up, and she glanced at her sister, who also looked excited by the idea. "It is a marvellous idea."

"Good. I hope that you are up to playing hostess. I have not held a house party since before Mother fell ill. I had thought to invite a few of my friends from town. And of course, Lord and Lady Graham should be invited."

"Of course. I do long to see Lady Graham. I have not seen her or Lord Graham since their marriage." Amelia wore a mask of subtle disdain. Charles tried not to be upset by her remarks, for it was common knowledge that she disapproved of Lady Graham's humble beginnings.

"Indeed," was his only reply. He stood and said his goodbyes. "I shall make all the arrangements before I leave town. Thank you, Lady Witmouth, for a most pleasant visit. Ladies," he nodded toward the girls and was somewhat annoyed when Lady Witmouth nodded for Amelia to see him out.

"Do come and see us again. We do so look forward to your visits." Amelia held out her hand, and he bent to kiss it.

"Of course. Thank you, Lady Amelia." He was struck again by how beautiful she was. Even so, something was missing for him, some hidden spark that he had come to cherish in Elisabeth's eyes. He pushed the thought away and smiled down at Amelia. "I shall call again tomorrow if it is convenient?"

"You are always welcome, here, Lord Charles. Father will be sorry he missed you this morning. Shall I reserve a place for you at dinner? He would like the chance to visit with you."

"Thank you, I would like that." Charles bowed and left, feeling guilty that he did not have the feelings to back up his statement. In truth, he would rather be back home visiting with Miss Steele, than dining with

the Witmouths. "Until tomorrow then."

Charles waved to his coachman, instructing him to take him to the gaming club. Once there, he settled down at a table to play poker, wishing to lose himself in thought.

After an hour of steady drinking and card playing, Charles was surprised to see Benjamin walk into the club. Charles stood and greeted him, throwing down his cards on the table. "I am done, gents." He had won a tidy sum at the table and was happy to walk away while he was ahead so he could have a chat with his friend. "What brings you to town, then?"

"I have some business. How long are you here for?" Benjamin followed him over to a table and sat down. After Charles was seated, they ordered more drinks and a bit of dinner.

"Only for a few days. I need to get back to the manor, as I will be hosting a house party next week. You and Anna will be invited, of course."

"A house party?" Benjamin raised his brow. "And I take it the fair Lady Amelia will play hostess?" He took a sip of his Port and studied Charles carefully.

"Indeed she will." Charles looked away, hoping that Benjamin could not read his thoughts. "It is time I get on with it."

"I suppose," Benjamin stated simply. "And how are the boys? I suppose you will want to introduce them to Lady Amelia? I must say you two

make a fine couple."

"Yes. They will have to meet her sometime."

"At least now you have nothing to fear as far as pranks. Miss Steele seems to have whipped them into shape." Benjamin toasted him and took another sip.

"Yes, she has." Charles sighed.

"What is it then? I wish you would just admit it."

"Admit what?"

"You have feelings for Miss Steele."

Charles took a sip of his drink to stall for a moment. "Yes, well, there is nothing to be done about it now."

"And why not?" Benjamin shifted in his chair, leaning towards him as if he had some great secret to tell. "Are you afraid of what people might think if you were to marry the girl?"

"No. I am worried about breaking my word to Amelia. I like to think I am a man of honour."

"And you are, my friend. But you have one life to live. Do you really want to waste it, miserable, with a woman you do not love?"

"Perhaps I am not as brave as you are, my friend." Charles wished Benjamin would leave it at that. Charles did not want to allow himself to hope. It hurt too much. "I must admit that I find her attractive and bright. She seems to know what I am thinking before I even say a word."

"You know that my father fired Anna when he found out I had feelings for her, did you not?" Benjamin said after a short silence.

"I did."

"I thought our love was hopeless. But I knew that I would never be happy with anyone else, so I took a chance. Everything has worked out in the end. Perhaps it will be the same for you and Miss Steele? You will never know unless you try."

"Not everyone is as lucky as you and Anna have been." Charles set down his empty glass and sighed. His head was swimming slightly.

"That is true, I suppose. However, you are wrong about one thing."

"And what is that?" Charles gave a soft chuckle.



"You are brave enough. You just have to take the first step." Benjamin stood and took his empty glass. "Refill?"

Charles shook his head. He had had enough to drink that day. Instead, he waited for the meal to come, thinking over what Benjamin had said. It all felt so hopeless, even still. Charles had no family left to object to his marrying a governess. However, he still had the promise he had given his mother, the promise he had made to Amelia. If he broke off his courtship with her and started a romance with Miss Steele instead, he would be barred from society. Lord Witmouth could make a lot of trouble for him in town. No. He had made his decision, and there was nothing more for him to do than to stick by it.

## Chapter 24

Elisabeth was giving the boys a math lesson, sitting out on the grass. She would hold up fallen leaves and ask the boys to do multiplication problems.

"Now, boys, focus. I told you we could have our arithmetic lesson outside only if you would apply yourselves." Elisabeth brought order back to the 'classroom', holding up two leaves in her hand. "Now, Matthew, do this multiplication. What is 2 and 2?"

Matthew thought for a moment, plucked two leaves off a nearby bush, and handed them to her. "Four."

Elisabeth smiled. "Very good, Matthew. Now," she turned to William, putting all four leaves into her right hand. She picked up three more leaves, giving him a more difficult multiplication problem. "What is three multiplied by four?"

William quickly plucked twelve leaves and handed them to her. She struggled to hold them all in her hands but smiled as she waited for him to say his answer aloud. "Twelve," he said proudly. "Really, Miss Steele. That was an easy one."

William had excelled in arithmetic, advancing quickly since she had taken the position as their governess.

"Very well. Your next problem is ..."

William's head snapped up, and Elisabeth followed his gaze. She threw down the leaves when she saw Lord Hensol had returned home. He walked towards them with a broad smile on his handsome face. She turned around and grabbed the history book she had brought with them, turning to a random page. She began to read aloud, the boys settling down on the blanket, acting as if they had been listening for a very long time.

When Lord Hensol neared, the boys jumped up and ran to him, greeting him excitedly. "That was a short trip!" William said as he hugged his brother.

Lord Hensol closed the distance between them and Elisabeth, smiling all the while. He picked up Matthew and tousled his hair. "I told you I would only be gone a few days. Did you not believe me?"

"Well, you have always said you will only be gone a few days, and then you are gone for weeks." William came and sat back down with Elisabeth. "We are only pleasantly surprised, that is all."

Charles set Matthew down and joined them on the blanket. "Well, I hope you will see that I have been true to my word. Perhaps you will be better inclined to trust me next time I am away."

"Are you going away again so soon?" Matthew asked, whining a bit.

"Not at all. In fact, we will have a house-full here in the next few days. I have some friends of mine coming out from town for a house party."

"Oh, what jolly good fun!" William jumped up again and started pacing. "Will lady Amelia be coming?"

Charles cleared his throat nervously and glanced at Elisabeth. She looked away, worried that her face would give away her feelings.

"Ahh, yes, she will. And her sister is coming along with her." Charles bent down, motioning for William to sit still. He did so, and Charles glanced at her again. "I beg your pardon for interrupting your history lesson. I only wanted to say hello and ask how your week has been? The boys' week, that is. I came to see how they have behaved for you." He stumbled about his words, making her even more nervous. The boys began to whisper, snickering at how they had spent the whole of their days outside, learning from the comfort of their 'pirate ship.' She gave the boys a stern look and stood.

"It is time for your luncheon, boys. Go inside and wash up, please." Guilt washed over her again at having deceived Lord Hensol. She knew she should not take such risks, going against his orders while he was away. However, she could not bear to see the look of boredom on the boys' faces. A flash of her brother's face assailed her, his forehead pale and beaded with sweat.

The fever had hung around John for days before it had broken, leaving him exhausted and weak. They were all still so worried about him, as he was not out of danger yet. And his illness was not the least of their worries. The money Mrs Taylor had given them had quickly disappeared with the expense of the doctor's visits and medicines.

"I beg your pardon, sir. We were only out here because it was such a fine day."

"No need to apologize. They looked to be completely enraptured with your lesson. For the life of me, I do not know how you keep their attention so." He bent and helped her fold the blanket they had been sitting on. Her memory flashed with images from the night of the play as he had helped her fold blankets. She let her arms fall quickly, making him fold it the rest of the way. He did not seem to mind, though, for he slung the blanket over his arm and carried it for her as they walked back to the house.

"I hope you will not mind accompanying the boys downstairs during the evenings for the house party. I promised them they could meet the guests." Charles walked beside her, striking up a friendly tone. She was relieved that he did not seem angry that they had been conducting their lesson outside.

"I will do whatever is required of me, My Lord." She knew she was acting churlish, but the mention of Lady Amelia had put her on edge. It was none of her concern who Lord Hensol was courting, but it hurt her all the same. "It is only right that they meet your future bride."

Charles halted, placing a hand on her arm to stop her. "I did not know you had heard about Lady Amelia and I ..."

He shifted uneasily, lowering his gaze. "Mrs Taylor informed me of your courtship a couple of weeks ago. My congratulations, My Lord." She moved towards the house, but he stopped her again.

"Wait, please. I want to explain."

Elisabeth gave a short laugh. "Explain? You are not obligated to explain anything to me, My Lord."

He took a step closer to her, making her heartbeat spike. She was afraid he would be able to hear it, for the drumbeat pounding in her ears drowned out everything but his voice.

"I wanted to apologize for the night of the play. I fear my actions may have been misconstrued."

Her heart nearly stopped. So it had meant nothing to him. Elisabeth had only been imagining that he cared for her. "There is nothing to apologize for, sir. I was a bit out of sorts that evening, and I apologize if I misunderstood your kindness." She tried to hold back the tears welling in her eyes. "Now, if you will excuse me, I am sure we will all have a lot to do to prepare for your guests."

She hurried away without a second glance. "Wait, Miss Steele! Wait!" Lord Hensol caught up to her and held out the blanket for her. "Here, you might need this later."

"Of course. Thank you, sir." She tucked the blanket over her arm. Smoothing the blanket over her arm, she hesitated to ask a favour of him.

"What is it, Miss Steele?"

"I am sorry to keep you, sir, but I wonder if I might go to visit my sister on one of the afternoons while your guests are here. I assume William and Matthew will be spending much of their time with you, especially during tea time?"

"Of course, I had hoped you would be able to accompany them in case they require anything. However, I do not see any harm in your going home for an afternoon."

"I do not wish to interfere with your guests, sir. I will accompany the boys and sit quietly in a corner in case they need me." She could see that this answer disappointed him. Did he expect her to join the party? She was nothing but a humble governess. She was sure his future fiancée would not appreciate the governess inserting herself in the group.

"Indeed," was all he said. "Well, thank you, Miss Steele. Your assistance is greatly appreciated."

They made their way up to the patio, and he opened the door for her. The boys were waiting for them in the parlour, talking excitedly about the upcoming festivities. "I bet Lady Amelia is beautiful," Matthew was saying.

William shook his head, not realizing that Elisabeth and his brother had come into the room. "Not as pretty as Miss Steele. No one is as pretty as Miss Steele."

Lord Hensol cleared his throat to announce their presence. "I thought Miss Steele told you two to go and wash up."

Elisabeth was glad that he had spoken first, for she did not trust her voice to hold steady. She could feel her cheeks burning and wished for nothing more than to escape to the safety of her room. She mumbled an excuse and rushed out of the room.

The boys soon joined her in the schoolroom, and their luncheon was delivered a few minutes later. Elisabeth was uncharacteristically quiet during their meal, and she knew the boys sensed it. They said very little as well, watching her to see if she was alright.

"Will there be many ladies coming here during the house party?" Matthew asked.

Elisabeth jumped at his question, his query interrupting her thoughts. "Ahh, I do not know who all will be invited, Matthew. However, your brother will expect you to be on your best behaviour."

"We will get to practice our etiquette, will we not, Miss Steele?" William interjected.

"Yes, it will be the perfect time to practise, William."

The boys chattered on about how they would impress Lady Amelia, Elisabeth growing more nervous by the second. At last, she excused herself, her plate of food hardly touched. Stepping out into the hall, leaving the door cracked so that she could hear if the boys called for her, she paced up and down the hall for a moment, gazing at the paintings of Talbot's long past. She stared up at a portrait of the late Lady Talbot, Lord Hensol's mother. She was a stern-looking woman, her mouth unsmiling as she seemed to glare at Elisabeth. Lady Talbot would have never approved of her son marrying a governess.

Perhaps Mrs Taylor was right. She did not belong here. Even if she stayed for another year or two, the boys would soon be away to



school. They would not need her any longer. She wrapped her arms around her middle, wishing that she could stay with the boys forever. She could no sooner imagine her life without them than she could do without air.

When she turned around, Lord Hensol was behind her, watching from the landing. "Are you well, Miss Steele?"

She pasted a smile on her face and nodded, walking back towards the classroom. "Of course, sir. I only needed a bit of time to myself. The boys are very excited about the party."

"Yes, I knew they would be. Hopefully, they are not making a nuisance of themselves with their chatter. Perhaps I should have waited to tell them until the party was closer." He glanced at the doorway, seeing the boys had their heads together, discussing something seemingly of great importance.

"Not at all. It will give them something to look forward to." Elisabeth curtsied and tried to escape back into the schoolroom.

"Miss Steele, a moment, please? Mrs Taylor has brought it to my attention that your brother is ill? I wanted to offer my services. Please let me know if you need to send for a doctor. I will cover the expense."

Elisabeth was stunned. "I ... thank you, My Lord, that is very kind of you. My brother is on the mend, but I will come to you if anything changes."

"Good, well, I will let you get on."

Elisabeth watched him walk back down the stairs, struck by his generosity. He was not making it easy for her to let him go.

## Chapter 25

The day of the house party soon arrived, and all the house was abustle with preparations. Charles hardly had time to pine over Elisabeth, throwing himself into his work, as he so often did.

"They are coming up the drive, My Lord," the butler announced.

"Thank you." Charles straightened his cravat and brushed off his sleeves as the carriages pulled to the front of the house. A total of four carriages had come out from London, all of them carrying lords and ladies bent on having a good time in the country.

After taking a deep breath, Charles walked out the front door, pasting a broad smile on his face. He neared the first carriage and saw that it was Lady Amelia and her sister. He opened the door for them, and Amelia stuck her hand out, waiting for the customary kiss. He gave her hand a slight peck and then helped her down from the carriage. He turned to her sister and helped her down as well.

"Oh, Lord Charles, it is as charming as I remember," Lady Amelia gushed. He offered her his arm and cast a nervous glance up to the schoolroom window. She knew that the boys would be watching the guests arrive. However, he hoped that Miss Steele was not watching, somehow feeling like he was being unfaithful to her as he escorted Amelia into the house. She leaned on his arm, going on about how beautiful the house was in the summertime. "You will have to take us on a tour of the grounds later on."

"Of course, Lady Amelia. As soon as everyone is settled, we shall take a turn about the gardens."

"Lovely," she said, smiling up at him.

He turned around to welcome his other guests, "Please follow me. There are refreshments laid out for you all. And when you have changed and freshened up, we will go on a tour of the gardens. Come," Charles said and headed towards the front door. He happened to glance up once more, seeing that Miss Steele had joined the boys at the window. She quickly backed away and out of sight when she realized he had seen her.

Guilt washed over him for a moment. He soon shook it off, however. Lady Amelia was his main concern now. He could not be bothered with the feelings of the governess. Even as he thought it, he berated himself for it. Elisabeth had become more than just a governess. Therein lay the problem ...

"Why do you frown so, Charles? Is everything alright?" Amelia asked as they walked into the drawing room. The tea had been laid and the cook had indeed outdone herself this time.

"Am I? I do apologize. I must remind myself not to worry about business for the next few days." He pasted a smile on his face and chuckled softly to put her at ease, releasing her arm. She walked into the drawing room, taking her gloves from her dainty hands. Turning, he greeted the rest of his guests at the drawing room door, and they were soon sitting down with their tea and refreshments. However, he stalled at the door, eager to have the boys come down and meet Amelia and his other guests.

Mrs Taylor stood outside the door, ready to escort the ladies to their guest quarters. He motioned her over. "Mrs Taylor, will you ask Miss

Steele to bring the boys in for tea? I am sure Lady Amelia would like to meet them before they retire for the evening."

"Of course, sir."

Charles went back into the drawing room, entering into the conversation. "Lord and Lady Graham will be here shortly. I told them you would all arrive at about four o'clock. You made good time from London." It was not yet 3:30.

"Yes, we decided to get an early start. We wanted to be here in plenty of time for the gong," Amelia explained. She glanced at the seat she had left open for him at her left. He went to the table, and a maid filled a cup of tea for him while he retrieved a biscuit and a petit four. Amelia was already settling into her role as hostess, asking the other guests if they needed a refill on their tea.

He went to sit down next to her and started up a conversation with the gentlemen. He noticed how Amelia kept the conversation moving forward. A hostess had to pay attention to such things, and he reasoned how nice it would be to have a woman's touch around the manor. If only it could be the woman he was fast falling in love with

...

The butler came in just as Charles was sitting down with his tea, announcing Lord and Lady Graham had arrived. "Oh, splendid. Excuse me for a moment; I shall bring them in." Charles set his teacup on the side table and went out to the foyer.

"Hello, Benjamin. Anna. So good of you to come." He greeted Benjamin, clapping his shoulder good-naturedly. "Everyone else has arrived and is sitting down to tea in the drawing room."

"Ahh, very good. They arrived earlier than we thought. Anna and I had hoped to get here before them to help you greet them." Benjamin handed his hat to the butler and then offered his arm to his wife.

"How are the little socialites, Charles?" Anna asked, teasing him. She had told him and Benjamin about the many oddities the noble class had, including 'dressing at the gong'. It had taken her a while to get used to all the rules of etiquette, but she had mastered them all the same. Even so, it did not stop her from poking fun at them from time to time.

"They are well and having a lovely time already. Amelia has taken over as hostess, so you will have a relaxing time of it, I think." Charles had asked Anna for help if the occasion arose. Amelia would, no doubt, be offended if Anna tried to offer assistance.

"Well, that is fine by me. I shall simply enjoy myself this weekend." Anna smiled, unthreatened by Amelia taking charge. They entered the drawing room to the sound of a lively debate. Amelia was sitting by quietly, listening to the gentlemen debate until there was a satisfactory break in the conversation.

"I agree with you, of course, Lord Cavendish, that the working class needs to have better working conditions. But they also must realize that the merchants cannot be expected to provide for their every need."

Charles, Benjamin, and Anna sat down, and tea was brought to them. Anna settled in, and from her expression, Charles could tell that a fight was on the horizon.

"What is this you are discussing?" Anna asked. Charles and Benjamin knew that she was anything but casually interested in the subject. As a former member of the working class, her views were quite passionate when it came to the conditions people worked and lived in.

"We were discussing the working conditions in the mills back in London. There have been several people advocating for higher pay and shorter working hours. And some have complained about housing."

"I have been to several mills and can tell you for a fact that the working conditions are atrocious, not to mention dangerous. And it is especially dangerous for the children who work there. It would seem to me that the owners of these mills would get better work out of the employees if they did take better care of them."

Charles could see the conversation taking a turn for the worst and racked his brain for some topic to change the subject. However, Amelia answered before he had the chance.

"Yes, of course, I agree with you, Anna. But how can the owners of these mills be expected to pay for everything? Surely they must think about profits as well?"

"Your father owns shares in several mills, does he not, Lady Amelia?" Anna countered. It had not been lost on her that Lady Amelia had not addressed her as 'Lady Anna'.

Amelia's cheeks coloured. Charles gave a nervous chuckle and changed the subject. "Well, I will see what is keeping my brothers. I

had asked the governess to bring them down so you might meet them, Lady Amelia." Her expression changed immediately, smiling up at him.

"Oh, I have been longing to meet them."

He nodded and stood, making his way over to the door. He motioned the butler over and asked him to see what kept Miss Steele from bringing the boys down. However, as he turned to go back into the drawing room, Miss Steele and the boys appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He let out a relieved breath, hoping that their presence would stave off any more conversation about politics or working conditions. "Ahh, Miss Steele. I was beginning to worry." He held out his hand to usher the boys into the drawingroom but halted when Miss Steele did not come with them. "What is it, Miss Steele?"

"I hope it will not be an inconvenience, My Lord, but I have thought to go and visit my sister this afternoon."

Charles' heart fell. "Oh, well, I had hoped that you would join us for tea. The boys have been so looking forward to meeting our guests."

"Of course. Well, perhaps Mrs Taylor would not mind sitting with them?" She looked nervous, and he wondered if it was more than just her anxiousness to check on her brother.

"Can you not stall your visit until tomorrow? Is your brother not doing well?" Charles closed the distance between them, his tone softening.

"John is doing better, but he is not out of danger quite yet. I had



hoped to see how he was doing and give my mother some relief. She does not sleep when any of her children are unwell."

"That is only to be expected from good mothers." Charles tried to think of some way to persuade her to stay. Somehow her presence settled him. He would feel more at ease if she were in the room. "Please, I beg that you would stay during the boys first meeting with Lady Amelia. I want them to make a good impression."

She did not answer for several seconds. Finally, she gave in. "Very well, sir."

"Good, thank you." He motioned for her to follow him into the drawing room. She placed a hand on each of the boys' shoulders, standing between them as they entered. Charles beamed as he walked them over to the assembled company. Clearing his throat, he procured everyone's attention. "Lady Amelia, my friends, these are my brothers. This is William."

William stepped forward and bowed deeply. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lady Amelia. Ladies. Gentlemen." He nodded to each of the guests with a sombre expression and then stepped back to Miss Steele's side.

Charles tried not to laugh, but his serious expression was a foreign thing to behold. He then looked at Matthew and winked. "And this is my brother, Matthew."

Matthew then stepped forward and bowed as William had done. He took Lady Amelia's hand and shook it firmly. "Hello, Lady Amelia. It is an honour to meet you." He then bent and kissed her hand. He returned to Miss Steele's side and looked up at Charles. "How did I

do?"

Lady Amelia laughed and put her hand over her heart. "My goodness, Charles. You did not tell me your brothers were so charming."

Charles put an arm around Matthew, his fingers brushing Miss Steele's momentarily. She quickly moved her hand and clasped them behind her back. "Yes, they are quite the little gentlemen, are they not?"

"They certainly are. Come and sit by me, Matthew," Amelia said, holding her hands out for Matthew. However, the charm stopped there. He edged closer to Miss Steele, leaning into her.

"No, thank you, Lady Amelia. We are to sit with Miss Steele in the corner and not make a commotion."

"Is that so? And is this your governess?" Charles watched as Amelia gave Miss Steele an icy stare.

Miss Steele stepped forward and curtsied to the company.

"Yes, I beg your pardon. This is Miss Steele, our governess." Charles introduced her, hating the look that Amelia was giving her. There was nothing to be done now, however. He sent the boys over to the edge of the sitting area, Miss Steele ushering them away. He could only hope that Amelia would be kind.

## Chapter 26

Elisabeth could not help the jealousy that welled up inside her, watching as Lord Hensol walked out to greet the carriages. William and Matthew had gone to the window first, but Elisabeth had been leery of going to the window. She did not want Lord Hensol to think she was spying on him. She did not want him to believe that she cared, even though she did.

"That one must be Lady Amelia," William said aloud, pointing at the woman. Elisabeth's curiosity was piqued. She edged over to the window and risked a glance. She should not have worried, for Lord Hensol's attention was solely focused on the pretty, petite blonde he was helping out of the carriage.

"She is beautiful," Matthew stated. "Not as beautiful as mother and Miss Steele, but still."

He said it so matter-of-factly that Elisabeth had to laugh. "Well, thank you, Matthew. However, please do not say such things when you are downstairs with the ladies and gentlemen."

Lord Hensol greeted his other guests and then offered Lady Amelia his arm. They looked so perfect together, like they had always belonged to each other. Elisabeth stifled the urge to cry, to run away from the window. She wanted to flee, but something kept her rooted to the spot.

"He's looking up here. He knows we would be watching." William waved, eliciting a smile from Lord Hensol. His eyes met hers, and she gave a little gasp, moving away from the window and out of sight. She

covered her mouth with her hand and turned her back on the boys.

"What is the matter?" William asked, cocking his head to the side. "Did you see a spider?"

Elisabeth shook her head vigorously, doing her best to recover. He had seen her. There was no telling what he must think of her. She was not a child who could be forgiven such silliness. It was not becoming of a governess to spy. "No, I did not see a spider." Unless Lady Amelia could be considered such a creature.

Elisabeth silently berated herself for such thoughts. She was sure that the future Lady Talbot was a kind and generous young woman. She could not imagine Lord Hensol would marry for fortune's sake alone. He did not strike her as someone who would marry for advantage alone. Lady Amelia must be quite the lady, indeed, to win his heart.

It was only right that Lord Hensol choose her. He needed a lady such as Amelia by his side. He would never think of being with Elisabeth. She was just a lowly governess, and he was so far above her, in wealth, position, and breeding.

"You best change before you come down with us," Matthew said as he jumped down from the window seat. "We all want to look our best. That is what you told us this morning."

The excitement of these roving guests was over for the time being, but Lord Hensol would soon be calling for the boys to go down and have tea with them.

"There is no need, Matthew," she replied, smoothing her skirt. "I will

not be going into the drawing room today. I am only walking you down, and then I am going to visit my sister."

Matthew's head snapped up in alarm, and William immediately started to argue.

"You're not coming in with us? It will all be very dull," William said, kicking the air.

"I am allowed one day off," she said, laughing at his antics. "I'll be home to share supper with you. Now, you best change— both of you. You want to look your finest when you meet your future sister-in-law."

"I thought Lady Amelia was going to be our new mother," Matthew said as they headed towards their room.

"No, silly, mothers cannot be replaced. Besides, you cannot make your sister-in-law your mother."

"She is old enough to be our mother. Besides, mothers are much nicer than sisters."

"You have never had a sister, so how would you know?" William rolled his eyes at Matthew's ridiculous questions while Elisabeth did her best to hold in her laughter. If only the world were as simple as seen through the eyes of a child. Maybe then her heart would not be broken.

She waited for the boys to change, waiting in the quiet schoolroom. She smoothed her skirt, feeling ill at ease after Matthew's remarks. It would not matter, for she was not going into the drawing room anyway.

The boys were soon ready, and they headed downstairs. Lord Hensol was speaking to the butler in the drawing room doorway when they came down. He glanced up at her, their eyes meeting. Her heart skipped a beat, and she quickly lowered her gaze.

He walked over to them and met her at the bottom step. "There you are. I was beginning to worry."

"I do apologize, My Lord." The boys headed to the drawing room, leaving her alone with Lord Hensol. "What is it, Miss Steele?" He held out his hand as if she should take it and follow them into the drawing room.

"I hope it is not an inconvenience, My Lord, but I had hoped to go and see my sister this afternoon."

However, Lord Hensol had other ideas. After much cajoling and convincing, Elisabeth followed them into the drawing room. Now she was sorry that she had not changed. She was in her plain, brown cotton dress, the one she did not care if it got dirty. Indeed, the hem was splattered with dark mud stains and fraying at the edges. She gulped as they entered the drawing-room and was immediately faced with the woman she assumed was Lord Hensol's bride-to-be.

Elisabeth's fears were confirmed when Lord Hensol introduced her to the boys. And she was made even more nervous when Lady Amelia turned an icy glare on her. She could feel her cheeks burning under

everyone's scrutiny and was relieved when they were finally allowed to sit down.

She folded her hands in her lap, and when she chanced another glance up at the lords and ladies, Lady Graham met her gaze. She gave her a friendly nod and a look that said, "Do not let her cow you."

Elisabeth returned her smile and took a deep breath. She had nothing to be ashamed of. She would not allow Lady Amelia to make her feel small.

Elisabeth's ears pricked when she heard her name, the conversation having turned to governesses. "Good help is so hard to find nowadays. A good governess is a treasure seldom found," Lady Amelia was saying. She flicked a self-satisfied glance in Elisabeth's direction. "How fortunate for you to have found Miss Steele."

Charles looked at her with his piercing blue eyes, making her insides melt. Elisabeth looked away and wished she could disappear into the floor. She turned her attention to the boys and tried to strike up a conversation. However, the boys had heard Lady Amelia's remarks as well. William's face was a steely mask. Matthew leaned into her side, not knowing whether Lady Amelia was being friendly or not. She was definitely not.

When Charles spoke up, he did not take his eyes off Elisabeth. "Miss Steele has been a godsend. I do not know what we would do without her."

Lady Amelia followed his gaze to Miss Steele and gave a derisive laugh. "Indeed."

At this, Anna stood and came over to Elisabeth and sat down next to her on the sofa. The boys sat quietly by, watching the lords and ladies with unveiled boredom.

"I am sorry she is being unkind. Do not take it too much to heart. She is a debutante with nothing better to do than to tear others down." Anna took her hand and squeezed it lightly as if to bolster her spirits.

"Thank you, Lady Anna. I am not disheartened. It was kind of you to come over, but you should rejoin the party. It is not proper for you to sit over here with me." She let go of Lady Anna's hand and folded her hands in her lap once more, her back straight and eyes forward.

"Nonsense. I would much rather visit with you. Please do not make me go back over there." Anna smiled, her eyes dancing with mischief. Elisabeth softened then, glancing at the lords and ladies dressed in their finery. She looked down at her own threadbare dress and worn black leather boots. She felt again how out of place she was. She did not belong here.

"You look like you have been doing well. You have a nice blossom to your cheeks," Anna said, eyeing Elisabeth carefully.

Elisabeth glanced again at Lord Hensol, knowing that Anna was referring to her blush. "We have been spending much of our time out of doors." She quickly looked away, uncomfortable under Lord Hensol's scrutiny.

"Yes. I always say that it is beneficial to spend as much time out of doors as possible." Anna changed the subject, for which Elisabeth was



grateful. "The boys seem much improved since the last time I saw them. They are a credit to you."

"Thank you. It is an honour to be their governess. I will be sad when it is time for me to go."

Anna nodded in understanding. "Well, perhaps we will retain your services." Elisabeth's head snapped up, Anna's eyes shining with a hidden secret. The only reason that she would need a governess was if she was expecting.

"Are you ...?"

Anna let out a soft laugh. "Yes. In December, I think. Benjamin does not know yet, so please keep it to yourself."

Elisabeth's eyes lit up, and she took Anna's hand once again. "Oh, that is wonderful news. Congratulations," she whispered. "Lord Graham will be pleased."

"Yes, he will." Anna's expression turned serious. "I hear that your brother has taken ill. I hope he is recovering?"

Word traveled fast it would seem. But Elisabeth did not mind that Lord Hensol had told them. "He is on the mend but still in some danger. His fever is not as high as it was a few days ago, which is a blessing."

"I will keep him in my prayers. And do let me know if you are in need of anything." Anna straightened as her husband approached, giving him a broad smile. "Hello, my dear. I did not know you were coming to visit us. It would seem that the life of the party is over here."

"I can believe that. What is this I hear about your brother? I am sorry if he has been under the weather." Lord Graham sat down in a chair opposite them and took a sip of his tea.

"My youngest brother has been battling a fever, but he is doing much better." Elisabeth was growing uncomfortable at the Grahams' presence. The other guests were starting to notice, turning to each other in hushed whispers. Elisabeth cleared her throat and gave Anna a pleading look. "Do not you think you should rejoin the others? You cannot want to spend your time with me."

"Perhaps you are right. I believe Lord Hensol mentioned a tour of the grounds after everyone had finished their tea. You will join us in the garden, will you not? The boys would like that, I am sure." Anna stood, followed by her husband.

Lord Hensol joined them, startling Elisabeth. She had not seen him coming. "Yes, that is just what we were discussing. You and the boys would be most welcome to join us, Miss Steele."

The boys jumped up and pleaded with her, wanting to go and spend some time in the sunshine. She gave in, but not without casting a cursory glance at Lady Amelia. She shot her an ugly glance and turned away, looking down her nose at Elisabeth.

Lord Hensol saw none of the exchange, of course. There was nothing Elisabeth could say to dissuade the boys, and everyone was soon

finishing their tea so they could go outside. Gulping, Elisabeth waited at the back of the room while the rest of the guests filtered out to the patio, praying that the ordeal would soon be over.

## Chapter 27

Elisabeth was handling herself like a lady, ignoring Lady Amelia's daggers. He tried to keep the peace, keeping the conversation on safe subjects. But all the while, he was watching Elisabeth visiting with Anna and Benjamin, wishing he could be over there with them. Why did Amelia have to be callow? Elisabeth was not hurting her. He tried to deflect some of the remarks Lady Amelia was making. Still, she made them loud enough for Elisabeth to hear.

"Miss Steele is a godsend," he finally said. "I do not know what we would do without her." Elisabeth met his gaze, and her eyes filled with relief. Lady Amelia quieted at this.

"Well, I believe you had promised us a tour of the gardens, did you not?" Lady Amelia stood, no doubt hoping Miss Steele and the boys would stay inside.

"Of course. Shall we?" he asked the rest of the guests, and everyone nodded in the affirmative. They left their teacups on the tables for the maids to collect later. Charles made his way over to Elisabeth, Anna, and Benjamin, inviting them to go out into the garden for a tour.

The boys jumped up excitedly, always ready to go outside. However, Miss Steele was hesitating.

"Please, Miss Steele. It would do you and the boys some good. Besides, it is a holiday. No need to worry about lessons for the next few days."

"Very well, sir." She stood and helped the boys put their cups on the side table. Charles rejoined Amelia, who was waiting for him at the door.

"I am surprised you are letting the boys come with us. Most hosts would have sent the children back up to the schoolroom by now to continue with their lessons." Amelia linked her arm through his as they walked down the patio steps and onto the gravel path. "It is good to see you and your brothers are so close."

Charles raised an eyebrow. Amelia could be at once condescending and then cover it up in the next sentence, veiled congeniality. He glanced back at his brothers, Miss Steele ushering them down the steps. "Yes, we have been fortunate to grow close over the last few years, even though there is a significant gap in our ages."

"They are a credit to you. Matthew is a dear boy. Although I do not think William likes me very much."

Charles knew that was true. William was fiercely protective of Miss Steele. And even though he was young, Lady Amelia's remarks had not been lost on him. "Perhaps it will take him some time to warm to you." Children were usually such good judges of character. Perhaps he should have a talk with William and see what his first impression of Lady Amelia was. Not that it would make a difference in his final decision.

Charles shook his head. As if he had a choice now whether he married Amelia or not. He had already backed himself into a corner. There would be consequences if he broke off their courtship.

"Ahh, Lord Hensol. I see you have made some improvements to the

fountain," Lord Cavendish said, joining them at the trickling pool. Amelia let go of his arm and joined her sister, who had been speaking with Lord Harrow and his wife. Charles watched them whisper for several seconds before Amelia pulled her sister in Miss Steele's direction. He tried to focus on what Lord Cavendish was saying but found himself worrying over Miss Steele.

He turned his attention back to Lord Cavendish, trying to focus. "Ahh, yes, I made some improvements last summer. The statue of the cupids is new."

"It is very effective. I should like to replace the old fountain in my own garden. Who was your contractor?"

Charles gave him the man's name and then excused himself, searching for Miss Steele and Amelia. He could find no sign of them and was soon waylaid by Benjamin and Anna.

"Have you seen Lady Amelia and her sister? I believe they were heading for Miss Steele," Charles asked, worry lining his face.

"I believe they walked over there, in the direction of the hedgerow." Anna looked to where they had last seen Miss Steele. The boys had disappeared, and Miss Steele was nowhere to be seen.

"I do not want Lady Amelia making trouble."

"I believe it is too late for that, Charles. She seems to have taken an immediate dislike for your governess." Benjamin slapped him on the back and stepped aside. "We will let you go so you can sort it."

Charles thanked them, stepping around the couple as he hurried towards the hedgerow.

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Amelia pulled her sister towards the hedgerow, searching for Miss Steele. "What are you going to do Amelia!?" her sister asked harshly.

"Be quiet, Genevieve. I can see that Miss Steele will need to be got rid of. It would seem my future fiancé is quite smitten with her."

Genevieve tried to get Amelia to slow down. "You do not know that. Besides, why would he ever think twice about a governess?"

Amelia halted as they came to the edge of the hedgerow. She peeked around, spotting Miss Steele watching the boys climb a tree. She turned back to Genevieve and lowered her voice. "Men are driven by their passions. That is what Mother always says. I need to get her away from Charles before she has a chance to make him change his mind about proposing to me."

Genevieve peeked around the hedge and then looked back at her sister. "What are you going to do?"

"Never mind. Just come along with me and follow my lead." She pasted a smile on her face and started around the hedgerow. Genevieve followed her, nervousness showing on her face. Amelia rolled her eyes. Genevieve would need to learn these things if she were ever going to secure herself a husband.

"Ahh, Miss Steele, there you are," Amelia said sweetly. "I see you are allowing the boys to soil their nice clothes."

Miss Steele backed away, lowering her gaze. "Lady Amelia. I did not expect to see you in this part of the garden."

"Indeed? So you thought you would be safe to let the boys run wild?" Amelia smiled all the while she was berating Miss Steele. "No matter," she said when she was satisfied that Miss Steele was uncomfortable. "Boys will be boys, will they not?" She gave a joyless laugh and closed the distance between them. Genevieve followed like a puppy on a leash. She looked uncomfortable, as well. She had always been soft.

"Where are you from, Miss Steele? I assume you have no family? Most governesses do not," Amelia said, trying to make it look like she was making casual conversation. Every comment was meant to be a dagger to the young woman's heart.

Miss Steele straightened. "No, I have family. They live quite close by, actually."

"Oh, how happy for you. You must go and see them often?"

"As often as I can." Miss Steele looked back to the boys, sitting in some of the trees' higher limbs, pretending to look out over the landscape from their pirate ship.



"Your father must be a tenant for Lord Hensol?" Amelia went on, twisting the knife in farther with each question.

"No, he ..."

"Oh, a menial labourer then? I hear that Lord Hensol has employed several men from the village to build his retaining wall."

"My father died two years ago." Miss Steele folded her hands in front of her, daring to glare at Amelia.

"Oh, how sorry for you. No wonder you had to take a position as a governess. I am sure you have several siblings. How many do you have?"

Amelia grinned with gratification at having upset the woman, for she could see her clenching and unclenching her jaw before she spoke.

"I have four younger siblings," was all she said. But Amelia was not done with her. Far from it.

"You could not have been working here long. I see that you have not saved up enough to purchase a new dress. You must have had the one you are wearing for some time." Amelia clicked her tongue. "It is very unprofessional to come down to greet Lord Hensol's guests in such a state of undress. Did you know your hem is fraying, Miss Steele?"

Miss Steele smoothed her skirts, looking down at her hem. "I had planned to go home this afternoon and visit my family. It was supposed to be my half-day off. I wear this dress to walk home in because it is so worn ..."

"Oh, do they still allow menials a half-day off? I had not thought they did such a thing in the country. It was right that you stayed. Lord Hensol is paying you to look after his brothers, after all."

Genevieve grabbed her arm, no doubt wishing that she would stop. "Amelia, we should rejoin the others, do not you think?" Amelia shook her arm free.

"No, not at all. I am having a vastly interesting conversation with the governess, Genevieve. Who knows, I may need to employ one someday soon. I need to learn all I can about what separates one from a good governess," she turned and looked at Miss Steele pointedly, "and a bad one."

Miss Steele seemed to shrink before her eyes. She turned when she heard someone coming from behind the hedgerow. It was Charles. Amelia quickly pasted a smile on her face and went to meet him. "Oh, Charles, we have been having a lovely conversation with your governess. She has been doing so well making sure the boys are well-looked after."

Amelia took Charles' arm as he approached, walking up on Miss Steele as if she were a victor in a major battle. Hopefully, she had done enough to send the girl packing. She did not like the fact that Charles had employed a pretty young governess. When she was the house's mistress, she would see that Miss Steele was the first person sacked.

Miss Steele turned to the boys and told them to get out of the tree. They did as she said without argument. Lord Hensol waited for them to come down and told them to go inside and get cleaned up. "We should rejoin the others, should we not? Lord Cavendish had mentioned going up the hill where my father built a replica of some Roman ruins."

"Oh, that sounds divine," Amelia simpered. She shot Miss Steele a victorious glance and turned with Charles. Miss Steele followed behind them alone, as the boys had already run off towards the house.

"I beg leave of you for a moment, Amelia. I will be along shortly." Charles said, halting on the path.

Amelia frowned. "Whatever for? May I remind you that I am not the mistress of this house yet? Your guests are waiting for you to see to them, Charles."

He straightened, an angry spark flickering through his eyes. She softened and touched his arm. "I only say this as a gentle reminder, my dear. I would not want your guests spreading rumours in town that you are an inconsiderate host."

He moved his arm and stepped back. "Thank you for looking out for my reputation. But I assure you, I shall only be a moment. Please, rejoin Lord Cavendish, if you wish, and make sure that he is entertained." Amelia watched him go, heading back around the hedgerow, no doubt, to speak with Miss Steele. She set her jaw and tugged Genevieve down the path. She would have to do better next time. Miss Steele had to go.

## Chapter 28

Elisabeth walked back towards the house in silence, Lord Hensol and Lady Amelia having disappeared around the hedgerow. She tried to keep the tears at bay but failed in keeping them from falling down her cheeks. She had promised herself that she would not allow Lady Amelia to make her feel inferior. But she had. Her words had stung, and she realized all over again that she did not belong.

The life of a governess was a lonely one, indeed. She had tried to be so careful not to get too attached to the family she was working for. She was not a part of the family, but she was also not on the same level as the other servants. She was somewhere in between.

She knew the boys loved her as much as she loved them. However, she would soon be forgotten when it was time for them to go off to school. The offer from Lady Anna had been sweet. If she could have another position lined up for when the time came, she would feel more at ease. She knew that Lady Anna would never treat her as Lady Amelia had treated her.

Elisabeth gasped in surprise when Lord Hensol came back around the hedgerow. She wiped furiously at her tears, wishing that she could hide them from him. His brow furrowed as he neared, worry for her lining his face. "Are you well, Miss Steele? What did Lady Amelia say to you?" He reached out as if he might actually touch her, and she shrank away.

"She asked me questions about my background. That is all," Elisabeth tried to side-step him. She did not want to be left alone with him again, even though her heart longed for it. "I should rejoin the boys."

"The boys will be fine for a moment. Mrs Taylor can see to them if they need anything." Lord Hensol looked at her as if she might crumble into a thousand pieces. She did not need his pity.

"May I have your permission to go home then? The boys may play in the schoolroom until I return." Elisabeth felt like being alone, unable to keep her emotions at bay.

"Please, stay. Whatever it is she said to you, I am sure you know your place here is secure."

"I am not worried about my place, My Lord. I know that the boys need me, and I am happy to serve them for as long as they may need me." Elisabeth sniffed, realizing that she did not have a handkerchief with her.

Lord Hensol pulled out one of his own and handed it to her. "No, sir, I cannot ..."

"Nonsense. It is only a handkerchief, Elisabeth. Not a proposal." He laughed at his own attempt to lighten the situation, but her head snapped up.

"Why would you say that, sir? No wonder Lady Amelia feels threatened by me."

Charles backed down, shocked by her vehemence. "I did not mean ..."

"No, I am sure you did not. But I am not something for you to play

with and then when you are bored, throw away. I am a human being, Lord Hensol. I may be just a governess, but I have feelings."

Charles tried to step closer to her again, but she vied away. "Elisabeth, please ..."

"My name is Miss Steele, Lord Hensol. It is inappropriate for you to call me by my Christian name," she said flatly. "Now, I believe it is still alright that I go home to visit my family? It is my half-day off, after all."

He nodded in defeat. All the gusto had gone out of him. "I apologize, Miss Steele. You are right, of course. I will never again address you so informally. As for you seeing your family today, I do not think it wise. It looks like it might rain."

He looked up at the sky, and she followed his gaze. She did not care. "It does not matter. I will not melt if I get caught in a little rain." She shook her head. "I don't belong there, sir. Besides, you had given me permission to go home and see my sister. I need to be sure my brother has recovered as well. I'll be home before dark. Please ring when you are ready for me to come and get the boys." She then turned and walked around the side of the house towards the road, never once looking back.

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Elisabeth walked home at a brisk pace, fearing that Lord Hensol had been right that they were in for a summer storm. A single raindrop hit her cheek, and then an onslaught followed. She ran through the deluge, barely able to see as the water ran down into her eyes. When she arrived home, she was soaked through.

"Of course, the rain decides to let up *after* I walk through the door," Elisabeth said as she burst through the front door. Her mother jumped up and retrieved towels for her to dry her hair, and Harriet helped her peel out of her sodden dress. She hung it by the fire to dry and handed Elisabeth a blanket to wrap around her shoulders.

"Whatever are you doing out in this, my dear?" her mother asked. She filled the kettle and put it on the stove, foreseeing that her daughter would like a cup of tea to warm herself.

"I had hoped to come earlier, but I was waylaid by Lord Hensol. He is entertaining guests this weekend at the estate and wanted me to bring the boys down for him to introduce to his soon-to-be fiancée." Elisabeth rolled her eyes, knowing that Harriet would catch the gravity of that statement. "But I did not come to talk about me. How is John doing?"

Her mother clicked her tongue. "It is hard to say. We have had the doctor here several times, but he says that there is no way to be sure if he will come out of it or not. I have tried every home remedy, and yet ..." Her voice cracked, breaking with emotion. "He will want to see you, my dear, as soon as you have dried out a bit and warmed yourself by the fire."

"Is he conscious?"

"He is now," Harriet answered for her mother, who was too overcome to speak. "He took a bowl of porridge this morning, so that is good news, too, is it not, Mother?"

"Yes, of course, it is, dear. I am sure he will be better soon."

Harriet nodded and smiled, going upstairs to fetch another blanket. Elisabeth could tell that her mother was not as optimistic as she was letting on for Harriet's sake. "How bad is it really, Mama?"

Her mother turned from her place at the stove. She wiped her damp eyes with her apron, coming to sit with her at the kitchen table. "It is hard to say, Elisabeth. If he starts eating like he did this morning, there is hope. We do not have the money to pay for medicine. We shall just have to pray that he comes out of it."

Nodding, Elisabeth reached out and patted her hand. "I will go and see him now."

Her mother gave a weak smile and sent her off upstairs. When she came to the doorway, Harriet was sitting at John's bedside. She had a blanket tucked over her arm and was brushing the hair away from John's brow. "There are some of my most favourite people in the world." She smiled as she came into the small room. John's face lit up, and he tried to straighten. "No, please, do not try to move around too much, John."

Harriet got up, allowing Elisabeth to take her place. She wrapped the second blanket around Elisabeth's shoulders and then left the room, allowing her a chance to talk to John in private. "How are you feeling, my good man?" she asked.

He had sunk back into the pillows, his strength sapped from the little effort he had tried to put forward. "I am on the mend. What happened to you?" John asked, laughing softly at her dishevelled appearance.



"I was caught in the rainstorm. Why? Do I not look beautiful?" she teased.

"You are the most beautiful girl I know." He laughed, but then a fit of coughing wracked his lungs. After several seconds, he lay back on the pillows, exhausted. "Except for Sally Harrington. She is the most beautiful girl my age."

Elisabeth smiled, brushing his long bangs away from his eyes. "Sally Harrington, aye? I cannot believe my brother is in love with a pretty girl, and I am the last to know!"

Smiling weakly, he grabbed her hand. "You are still my favourite Elisabeth." His eyes twinkled with love, even though she saw his eyelids drooping.

"And you are still my favourite, John," she said tenderly. She tucked the covers up close to his chin, brushing the back of her fingers across his cheek. "Sleep now, John. I will come and see you again as soon as I can."

"Are you leaving already?"

"I will stay with you until you fall asleep; do not worry."

John nodded and soon fell into a peaceful sleep, his cheek tucked up against the palm of her hand. She tucked him in and then left the room, allowing him to rest. She went back downstairs and saw that her mother had poured her a cup of tea.

"How is he?" she asked, setting the milk in front of her. Elisabeth did not ask about sugar, knowing that her mother would be making economies to pay for John's care. At least, the little care she was able to afford. Little luxuries, such as sugar, would need to be cut back on. Elisabeth felt guilty, knowing that when she returned to Hensol, she would not have to go without anything. She thought about Lord Hensol's offer to help but quickly pushed the thought aside. His offer had been for a doctor, she was sure, not sugar.

Elisabeth settled down at the kitchen table again and took a sip of tea before answering her mother. "He seems to be improving. At least, the situation does not sound so severe as when you first wrote to me. What he needs now is a good rest, and I am sure he will be right as rain."

This seemed to relax her mother a bit, so she went about cleaning the kitchen while Harriet and Elisabeth chatted. "What is this about Lord Hensol having his future fiancée out to Hensol. Did you see her?"

"I did."

"Is she intoxicatingly beautiful? Oh, I wish I could see her," Harriet swooned.

Elisabeth laughed. "You read entirely too many novels. But yes, she is beautiful. On the outside, that is. She is not a very friendly person, though. I will be glad when they are all gone. I am sure she is trying to run me off."

"Why would she do that?" Harriet sipped her tea and waited for Elisabeth to reply.

How could she answer her, though? She did not want to go into all the details, especially in front of her mother. She had enough to worry about. "Let us just say that she is threatened by anyone who might be as pretty as she is. Or anyone her future fiance looks at for five seconds instead of looking at her. She seems quite the jealous type."

"The plot thickens. Oh, Elisabeth, I wish I could see you in there, talking with all those lords and ladies!"

Elisabeth rolled her eyes. "I would gladly trade places with you, dear sister."

## Chapter 29

Charles watched Elisabeth go, feeling the pang of loss. She was further from reach than ever now. He doubted she would stay in his household very long. After the way Amelia had treated her, in front of his friends and in private, he could not blame her.

He turned reluctantly, wishing that he did not have a house full of guests to tend to. His opinion of Lady Amelia was fast disintegrating. There was nothing he could do now, though. He needed to marry, and soon. He had a promise to keep to his mother. He could not get his mind off of Miss Steele, no matter how hard he tried.

His mind was consumed by her as he led his guests out to the replica of the Roman ruins his father had built shortly before his demise. Charles often went out to the structure to think. It was a long way from the house, and it was quiet. Benjamin seemed to sense his foul mood, even though Amelia did not, chattering on gaily as if nothing had happened.

Amelia split off to talk with her sister as they approached the ruins, noting how romantic the spot was. "I can imagine this would be the perfect place for a proposal," she said markedly. Charles had to use much restraint not to roll his eyes and huff in frustration. Lady Amelia was fast approaching on his last nerve.

"Cool down, my friend. You look ready to burst," Benjamin said through clenched teeth, all the while keeping a smile on his face for the other guests' benefit. "Would you like me to take over the tour while you take a moment? I know quite as much as you do about the place."

"No. But thank you all the same." Charles clapped him on the back, giving him a weak smile. "I just have to deal with a few things when we get back to the house. I do not want dinner to be strained."

"What happened back there, with Miss Steele?"

"I do not know for sure. I believe Lady Amelia was trying to make her feel uncomfortable."

"She obviously succeeded. Where is the lovely Miss Steele, anyway? Has she taken the boys inside?"

"The boys are inside with Mrs Taylor. I let Miss Steele go home for a visit to her family. You know that her brother is not feeling well?"

"I had heard that. It was good of you to let her go, seeing that there is a house party in full swing." Benjamin and Charles were joined by Anna, a painstakingly painted smile on her face.

"I know she is soon to be your betrothed, Charles, but I cannot stand to be around Lady Amelia and her sister for more than thirty seconds. How you manage, I will never know."

"Shush, both of you," Charles scolded. "There is nothing to be done now. I am stuck."

"No, my good friend, you are not. You are only stuck if you choose to

be," Benjamin said softly as they came upon the other guests. Charles blinked, taking that in for a moment. Benjamin's statement had unnerved him.

"When was this built, Lord Hensol?" Lord Cavendish asked. Charles took a few moments to remember, so thrown off balance was he. Amelia joined him and leaned on his arm again, annoying him even more.

"Ahh, Father started construction in the summer of 1799, and it was finished the next year, shortly before his passing. If you will climb the steps, you can see that he dedicated it to my mother. It was a favourite haunt of theirs." The party all climbed the steps and read the plaque that his father had installed near a faux door. He stayed below, however, walking around the circular structure so that he could think for a moment.

He was worried about Elisabeth. Lady Amelia's words had hurt her, he knew. If only he had come to her aid sooner, perhaps this whole situation could have been avoided. He approached the other side of the structure and saw his guests were again waiting for him by the stairs.

"Shall we go back inside? I see some rain clouds gathering. Besides, the gong will be ringing shortly anyway," Charles announced. They all nodded, the ladies commenting on their need to freshen up.

"I hope you will bring me out here for a walk while we are here, perhaps without the others?" Amelia asked. "It seems that it would be a lovely place to come for a nice peaceful chat."

Charles nodded, his jaw set in a grim line. "Perhaps."

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Charles paced in front of the window, looking out at the drive. "Fool woman!" he said under his breath. "I told her that it was going to rain!"

"Who are you talking to, Charles?"

Charles spun around, Amelia entering and catching him off guard.

"Oh, nothing. I only was saying that it was raining." Charles tried not to be annoyed that Amelia had found him but failed entirely. He turned back to the window, now fogging up with his breath. Where was she? Had she made it home safely before the rain had hit? What if she had fallen and injured herself in the deluge? A thousand different scenarios played out in his mind in a matter of seconds, increasing his anxiety for Elisabeth's well-being. If anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

"Come away from the window, Charles. Your attention will not make it cease before its time." She patted the sofa next to her, and he reluctantly did as she asked. "Is everything alright between us, Charles? You are happy that I am here, are you not?"

Charles licked his lips, not wanting to cause a rift. He would have to find a way to get along with his future bride. "Of course, we are. Why would you ask such a question?"

"I do not know. I only thought that you were agitated with me when we were out in the garden earlier."

Charles gave a nervous laugh. "Not at all," he lied. He wondered if he should confront her about her conversation with Miss Steele but then thought better of it. That would only open him up to more questions, and that was something he did not want.

"Good, I am glad. I so want to enjoy our weekend here." She stood and waited for him to join her. She looked resplendent in her evening gown, soft blue silk with gold trim. Her hair was done up in the latest fashion, with blonde curls framing her face. She was the opposite of Elisabeth in every way, and yet, it was Elisabeth he was drawn to.

He offered Lady Amelia his arm, wishing there was a way to get out of the mess he was caught in. He glanced over his shoulder one last time as they exited the room, joining the others in the drawing room as they waited for dinner to be announced. He had had no idea it was so late. He glanced at the grandfather clock as they made their way into the room, realizing that it was nearly eight.

His anxiety only grew from there. Miss Steele had promised that she would be home before dark. And yet, she was nowhere to be found. The sun would soon be setting, and with the inclement weather, she could be stuck in yet another onslaught of rain. His gut told him to order his horse and ride out in search of her. However, he could not do that to his guests without giving rise to questions he would rather not answer. He would wait for a bit longer, and if she had not arrived by the time the sun had set, he would go in search of her – never mind the consequences.

"You have a lovely home and a lovely garden, Lord Hensol," Lord Cavendish said. "Thank you for giving us the grand tour this



afternoon. I hope we will be able to see more of your lovely estate while we are here?"

Charles let go of Amelia's arm and joined Lord Cavendish at the hearth. A small fire had been built, as Hensol could be quite draughty when the weather turned. "I would be delighted to show you more of the grounds. I thought we might all ride out tomorrow if the weather turns." He had thought to take the boys along on a ride but was unsure if Elisabeth would agree. After today, he would not be surprised if she shut herself up in the playroom and did not come down until his guests were gone.

"Where is that pretty governess of yours, Lord Hensol? I thought she would bring the boys in to say goodnight before we went into dinner?" Lord Cavendish asked, lowering his voice so that only Charles could hear.

Charles did not like the tone he was using regarding Elisabeth, but he buried his fury and smiled. "I believe they are taking their meal upstairs as we speak. To be honest, Miss Steele has not returned as of yet. She went to visit her family, who only lives a short way off. She has a brother who is ill."

"Has not returned? My goodness, it is almost dark. Perhaps I should ride out and see if I might find the young lady?"

Charles wanted to say that hell would freeze over before he would allow Lord Cavendish to go and look for her. But he answered, "Do not worry, sir. If she has still not arrived by the time dinner is over, I will go and look for her myself. She is my responsibility, after all."

"What is this?" Amelia asked, overhearing that the conversation had

turned to Miss Steele. "I am sure there will be no need for you to leave your guests, Charles. The girl has probably used her good sense and stayed at home. No doubt, she will return in the morning."

"Even so, I would know that she is safe and well. It would not do for me to leave her out in this weather if she has injured herself."

Amelia gave a soft laugh. "Surely a servant can be sent in your place, seeing that you have a house full of guests?" Charles knew that she expected him to agree with her in front of everyone. But he would not be dictated to, especially in his own home.

"I would surely not. As I said, Miss Steele is my responsibility. Now, let us not worry anymore. Dinner is served." He motioned towards the dining room, allowing his guests to go in first. Amelia looked as if she was anything but pleased, her mouth a thin line. For the first time that day, Charles did not care.

## Chapter 30

Harriet walked with her to the door, trying to get her to see reason. "You cannot walk back to Hensol in this weather. You will be soaked through when you arrive!"

Elisabeth shook her head. "I will be fine. I cannot stay over. I have a duty to the boys."

"Surely Lord Hensol will understand."

"Even so, I will not shirk my duty. I must away before it grows dark. Do not worry; it is not far. And a little rain never hurt anyone."

Harriet and her mother turned to the door, watching as a cascade of water ran off the roof and created a waterfall in front of the door. They turned to her in tandem, disbelief furrowing their faces. Elisabeth laughed. "I have walked in worse before."

"When? During Noah's flood?" Harriet asked, her tone turning sarcastic.

Elisabeth rolled her eyes. She leaned in and kissed Harriet on the cheek. Stepping over to her mother, she did the same and wrapped her cloak around her shoulders. "I'll send word of my safe return as soon as I arrive."

She walked out the door and into the deluge. It was not as bad as it appeared from her mother's doorway. As she travelled down the road, the rain slowed to a drizzle. However, her mother had been correct about one thing. She would be wet through when she arrived.

She hurried down the road towards Hensol, arriving a little after the sun had set. Walking around to the servants' entrance, she came into the kitchen dripping wet. The cook was appalled when she saw her. "You walked home in this storm? My girl, do you have any sense at all?"

Mrs Taylor came out of her office and scolded her as well. "Elisabeth. I have been so worried. Why did you not stay at home until the morning?"

"I knew the boys would be worried about me if I did not go up and wish them good night. Besides, I have a duty to fulfill."

"One can leave duty by the wayside in extreme cases." Mrs Taylor motioned her into the room and had her sit by the fire while she fetched a towel.

"I will only sit for a moment. I want to get out of these wet clothes." Elisabeth sat by the hearth, drying her hair with the towel. "How is your brother?" Mrs Taylor asked, sitting beside her.

"He is awake but still relatively weak."

"A little improvement is still improvement."

"Yes, indeed." Elisabeth stood and made her way to the stairs.

"Mind you are quiet when you are going up the stairs. Dinner is underway," Mrs Taylor called from the bottom of the stairs.

Elisabeth nodded and climbed the stairs as quietly as she could. She opened the door leading from the kitchens out to the grand hall. Tiptoeing her way to the staircase, she hardly dared to breathe for fear of disturbing Lord Hensol and his guests.

She had nearly made it to the staircase when she heard the door to the dining room open.

"There you are! I was beginning to worry, Miss Steele."

She turned, facing Lord Hensol as he strode towards her. She clasped her hands in front of her, lowering her gaze. She had hoped to change before he saw her. There was nothing to do about it now. She knew she looked like a drowned rat, and all she wanted was to get into some dry, warm clothes.

"I am sorry if I caused you needless worry. I am fine, sir."

"You are drenched. It was foolish of you to return home in the rain." He stepped closer to her, glancing over his shoulder to be sure no one had followed him out into the hall. "Are you sure that you are alright?"

She refused to meet his gaze, still upset over her encounter with Lady Amelia earlier that afternoon. "Yes, My Lord. I am perfectly well. However, I would like to go up to my room and change before I catch my death of cold," she said, her teeth beginning to chatter.

"It was foolish of you not to take the carriage. Or a horse at the very least. I must insist that you do so the next time you visit your family. It will be a wonder if you do not come down with a cold."

She stood silent for a moment, his anger apparent. "It would not be proper, sir."

He swore under his breath. "Hang proper!" he whispered harshly.

"I enjoy walking, Lord Hensol. I was perfectly safe." She could not understand why he was so angry with her. "May I go, sir?"

He gazed at her longingly for a moment, the fight gone out of him. "Of course."

"Miss Steele? My goodness, we thought you had been swept away by the storm." Lady Amelia came out of the dining room, glaring at her as she approached. "It was very foolish of you not to wait until morning to return to Hensol."

She smiled as Lord Hensol turned around, feigning worry for Elisabeth. "I am quite well, Lady Amelia. I thank you for your concern."

She turned and started up the stairs, leaving Lord Hensol on his own with Lady Amelia. Elisabeth may only be a governess, but she did not have to suffer Lady Amelia's company for longer than was necessary.

Making her way to her room, she lit a candle and changed quickly. Her hair was a matted wet mess, which she brushed slowly. Thinking over everything that had happened that day, she felt her heart squeeze as if crushed by an invisible vice. Why was Lord Hensol so bent on making her miserable? Perhaps Mrs Taylor was right, and she should start looking for another position.

However, the thought of leaving William and Matthew now was almost inconceivable. They had become so dear to her over the last few weeks.

There was nothing to be done about it. Elisabeth had to make a decision. She had more than just herself to think about. Her family was counting on her.

She blew out the single candle and climbed between the sheets, welcoming sleep. "Things will look better in the morning," she told herself. But her racing thoughts would not quiet. She replayed the day's events in her mind until she could hardly bear to stay in bed. Rain pattered on the roof, and she guessed it must be well past midnight.

She got up and relit her candle, pacing the room. Elisabeth knew that if she did not distract herself with something other than her thoughts, she would never get to sleep. After wrapping her shawl around her shoulders, she took up the candle and tiptoed out of the room. Hopefully, Lord Hensol and his guests had gone to bed, but she would

be careful not to disturb anyone as she passed the guest rooms.

The house was eerily quiet as she walked down the hall where the guest rooms were, her candle casting long shadows on the walls. Making her way down the stairs, she saw that a single light burned in the drawing room. She slipped down the hall, being careful to stick to the shadows to avoid discovery. When she reached the pitch-black library, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Running her hand over the leather-bound books, she let the stress of the day fade away. No matter what the future held, she could not change it by worrying. Had not her father given her the same council hundreds of times?

Climbing one of the ladders on the far wall, she went in search of a novel that would distract her from the worries of her life. A comedy seemed to fit the bill. She picked a book and was about to climb down when she heard footsteps behind her.

She swung around, nearly falling from the ladder. Lord Hensol reached out and steadied her, placing his hand on her calf. "Careful. I am sorry I startled you."

Elisabeth gulped, her heart racing. Holding her hand over her chest, she climbed down and wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders. Lord Hensol leaned down and picked up the book she had nearly dropped on his head. "Your book, my lady." He handed it to her, bowing slightly as he did so.

"Thank you," she mumbled and tried to step past him.



"Wait, please." He followed her to the sitting area. Memories of the evening they had spent together with the boys flooded her mind. The night he had nearly kissed her ...

"It is not proper for us to be alone together like this, sir. Just as it was improper the night of the play." Elisabeth was going to go straight out the door and to her room, but his tone was so pleading.

"Elisabeth, please ..." The way he said her name made her heart ache. She turned in the library doorway, wishing that things could be different. She wished that she had been born a lady and not the daughter of a poor barrister. However, wishing would only serve to bring her more heartache and sorrow.

He took tentative steps towards her as if the slightest movement might send her dashing away like a stag after winding a hunter. "I had a dream like this shortly after you came here."

"A dream that we were alone together in the library?"

"Yes." He took another step towards her, and she instinctively backed away. "I am in torment, Elisabeth."

"In torment? Over what?" Her throat went dry, the blood pounding in her ears. She was not sure if she wanted to hear any more.

"Yes," he said, his voice coming in hoarse whispers. "Ever since you came here, I have been ..."

"If I have done or said anything to upset you, sir, I apologize. It has not been my intention to bring you grief ..."

"That is the last thing you have done. Elisabeth, my eyes have been opened to a world I never knew existed. Since you came, I look forward to waking up in the morning. I count the minutes until I can interrupt you and the boys in the classroom, just so I can see your face. Just so I can hear your voice. You have bewitched me, Elisabeth. I cannot deny my feelings any longer."

Elisabeth shook her head, backing away again. "Please do not do this. Stop before you say something that cannot be taken back." Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

He closed the distance between them, taking the candle from her and placing it on the side table. He reached for her and tried to take her in his arms, but she pushed him away. "You care about me. I know you do."

Elisabeth shook her head but was unable to deny it aloud. She did care for him, more than he would ever know. However, he was also being incredibly unfair to both of them. "Tell me I might hope, Elisabeth."

She grew angry then. "No, you may not hope," she spat. "What kind of woman do you think I am? You have Lady Amelia." She brushed past him and took up her candle once more. "Forget about me, Lord Hensol."

She fled the library as if it were in flames, tears blurring her every

step. He did not follow her, for which she was glad. She did not stop until she reached her room. Elisabeth set the candle on the writing desk, letting the full force of her tears come.

Wrapping her arms around her middle, she sat on the bed and wept. Why was he determined to make her miserable? When she had no more tears to cry, she lay on her side, watching as the candle burned to a stub and finally went out. She would start looking for a new governess position in the morning, no matter that it would tear her heart out to leave Hensol.

## Chapter 31

Charles woke up early the next morning, despite not sleeping the night before. His thoughts would not allow him to rest, replaying the library incident over and over. He knew that he had made a mistake by staying in the library when he realized she was there as well. Elisabeth had been correct in that it was not proper for them to be alone in the dark library.

However, the force of his emotions had not allowed him to leave. Not without telling her how he really felt about her. Last night had shown him even more that he could not be happy with Amelia. His heart ached at the very thought of not being with Elisabeth.

He dressed in his riding clothes and went down to the dining room, ordering a cup of tea while he waited for the rest of his guests to come down. He read the paper while he drank his tea, wishing he could distract himself.

Lady Amelia and Genevieve came down shortly after eight o'clock, ready to go out on the green and watch the men while they rode. He had arranged for the ladies to go on a picnic while he took the men on a hunt.

"Good morning, Lord Hensol. I trust you slept well?" Lady Amelia sat down at his right, and Genevieve sat down on her sister's right, nodding a greeting to him. He acknowledged her and turned to Lady Amelia.

"Not very." He set his teacup down and gave her a cursory smile. "However, it was my own fault."

"Oh? Pray, tell."

Thankfully the rest of his guests started filing into the dining room, and he was spared having to explain the cause of his insomnia to her. Breakfast got underway, and he tried to be the good host that everyone was expecting. His heart was not in it, though.

When breakfast was finished, they all got up and went out to the gravel drive. The men's horses were ready to go, and a surrey had been fitted out to take the ladies to the picnic area.

Charles' heart skipped a beat when he saw Elisabeth walk out the front door with the boys in tow. Matthew and William ran up to him, chattering on excitedly about the hunt. "I cannot wait until I am grown, and then I will be allowed to go on the hunt with you."

Charles patted William on the back. "You will be grown soon enough, Will." He glanced at Elisabeth, who stayed back a few feet, refusing to look him in the eye. "And how are you this fine morning, Matthew?"

"I am superb, thank you," Matthew said matter-of-factly.

Charles chuckled. "Well, I am glad to hear it. Do you know what the word superb means?"

"It means *excellent or extremely good*. It was one of our vocabulary words the other day, was it not, Miss Steele?"

"It was. Well done, Matthew." Elisabeth's voice was devoid of emotion, although she did smile at Matthew. He cringed at the fact he had wounded her. He wished he could take back his foolish professions of the evening before. He should have waited for the proper setting.

"Well, I am proud of you for using it properly in a sentence. You are becoming quite the orator." He tousled Matthew's hair. "Now, we should be off. I will see you at tea time, alright?"

The boys wished him luck, and Elisabeth took them back inside. He watched her go, all the while feeling his heart sink with loss.

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Elisabeth had never felt so nervous before. Having to face Lord Hensol after their encounter in the library had been one of the hardest things she had ever had to do. The boys could never know what had passed between them.

After taking the boys back up to the classroom, they watched at the window as the hunters rode off. The ladies' wagon pulled away, all of them looking as if they were having a marvellous time. Elisabeth turned away.

"I wish we could go on the hunt. I am a good rider. I think I could keep up, even with Charles' horse, who is the fastest," William boasted as he went to his desk.

"At least we could have watched with the ladies at the picnic. I would have promised not to be too loud when I cheered for Charles." Matthew followed his brother away from the window and sat down beside him. "May we go out to the green later and watch for a little while?"

"I do not think that is a good idea, Matthew."

Elisabeth felt bad for the boys. She had not planned to take them outside that afternoon since Lord Hensol and his guests would be out and about. However, seeing the longing on their faces, she wanted to give them something fun to do.

"Perhaps we should go and have our lesson outside today. I thought we might continue with our lesson in Scottish history."

"Are we learning about another battle today, Miss Steele? I want to be William Wallace again, since my first name is William, too."

"William Wallace was not in the battle we will be learning about today. However, you may be Robert the Bruce, if you wish." Elisabeth took up the history book and led them out the back way. They walked to a small wood just outside the garden, and there she explained the battle.

"Now, Will, you are Robert the Bruce, and you are waiting for the English to come. Matthew, you are the English."

Matthew nodded and went into the trees, waiting for Elisabeth to tell

them what happened in the battle. The boys both took up sticks, brandishing them as swords, and began to act out the battle.

“Take that, you dirty English!” William said and swung his stick at Matthew.

“Have it you!” Matthew said, parrying the blow.

Elisabeth watched from the sideline. “Be careful. Remember, this is a reenactment, not the real thing.” She laughed at their antics.

The boys continued their battle, and Elisabeth was about to tell Matthew to fall back when she heard the thundering of hooves coming over the ridge. “Matthew! William! Look out!” she yelled as the horses crested the hill. She ran to William, turning as the horses barrelled towards them. Matthew ran out of the way, but William was not fast enough. Elisabeth reached him just in time, grabbing him and pulling him to safety. The lead horseman pulled the reins hard, making the horse rear and scream.

Elisabeth cradled William’s head as they fell, twisting her ankle painfully when it caught in some brush. “Ho there! Get out of the way!” the horseman yelled. Elisabeth covered William’s head with her arms as the horse reared again.

After a few moments, the horseman was able to calm his steed. He climbed down and took the horse’s head in his hands, talking soothingly to it. Elisabeth looked and saw that the rest of the company of hunters had come upon the scene. Her stomach sank, realizing that the women were also walking down from the green to see what the commotion was. She turned to William, still lying on the ground. Her ankle throbbed, but she did not care about that now. “Are you alright?



Are you injured?"

William shook his head. "No, I am not hurt. Thanks to you." He stood and offered her a hand up, but she declined to stand. She touched her ankle, which was fast swelling.

"What in heaven's name are you doing out here? You might have been trampled, boy!" The horseman's face was red as a beet.

Elisabeth came to his aid. "Do not scold Master William. It was my idea to come out here."

"What kind of governess are you, allowing your charges to run about in the woods when there is a hunt on?"

Elisabeth did not have time to answer, for striding towards her was Lady Amelia, her face a mask of anger.

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Charles had watched from the back of the group as his brother was nearly trampled to death by a horse. Thankfully, Lord Cavendish had seen him and avoided the collision. His heart raced when he saw him and Miss Steele fall to the ground, the horse rearing dangerously close to their legs.

He dismounted, leading his horse to where his brothers now stood near Miss Steele. Lady Amelia's voice echoed over the hill as she berated her for her carelessness. "Master William might have been killed! What were you thinking?"

Charles touched Amelia's shoulder as he came up, handing his reins to Benjamin.

Elisabeth glanced at him momentarily, not answering Lady Amelia. Instead, she stood, wincing upon doing so. Charles approached her, taking her aside so that he could ascertain what had happened in some privacy. She limped slowly, and he wondered if she had broken her leg. "Are you injured, Miss Steele?"

"I have twisted my ankle, but otherwise, I am well." She winced, shifting her weight to her good ankle.

"What happened?" He could feel the anger boiling inside him. He tried to keep it under control, though, waiting for her to explain. "I can understand if the boys begged you to let them watch the hunt, but this is not the place to do it."

Elisabeth shook her head, tears pooling in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but Amelia strode up to them and started to explain what had happened. "William was nearly trampled by Lord Cavendish when they came over the rise. Miss Steele had no business to bring them out here when there was a hunt going on." She placed her hands on her hips and glared at Elisabeth.

"Sit down, Miss Steele." He motioned to a fallen log not far away, growing annoyed that Amelia was interfering. He had hoped to settle the situation in private. However, that would be all but impossible now. His guests crowded around, hoping to see that the boys were alright.

"We were playing the Battle of Bannockburn," William explained, stepping up to defend Miss Steele. "I am not injured, brother. Thanks to Miss Steele."

Charles turned to Elisabeth, her guilty expression telling it all. "I thought I told you that I do not want these teaching methods used for my brothers' education. You went behind my back? How long have you been teaching them thus?!" Charles was more afraid than angry, but it was not coming off that way. He could see by the fear in her eyes that he was losing control of his temper. This day could have turned out much different. He might have lost his brother because of her carelessness.

"I can explain, sir. You see, the boys were sad for not being able to go on the hunt, so I thought to distract them by ..."

"By putting them in danger," Amelia butted in. He glanced at her, then turned back to Elisabeth.

She had deliberately disobeyed him, and because of that, he might have lost his brother.

"You lied to me," he said flatly. She lowered her gaze, studying her boots. He was sure that her ankle must be paining her but could not get over the fact that she had put his brother in danger. He placed his hands on William's shoulder and told him to stand by Benjamin. He did not want his brothers to see what he knew he must do.

Elisabeth looked up at him, pleading. "Lady Amelia, would you give us a moment, please." Charles did not even look at Amelia as he said it, frowning at Elisabeth as she searched for words to apologize.

"Sir, I offer my most sincere apologies. I was not even thinking ..."

“No, and your lack of thought almost cost someone their life today,” he whispered harshly. “You are a selfish woman, Miss Steele. How can I trust you after this?” The hurt in her eyes was almost unbearable, but there was no turning back now. She had defied him, and he could not tolerate that in his household. He straightened, glaring down at her. “You are relieved of your position, Miss Steele. As soon as you are able, you may return home.”

## Chapter 32

Elisabeth's heart broke when Lord Hensol uttered his final words. She nearly burst into tears right then and there, but she would not give Lady Amelia the satisfaction. She sniffed back the tears as best she could and nodded. "I am sorry, sir. More than you will ever know." She said it so quietly that she was not sure he heard it.

"No! Charles, she did not do anything wrong!" William tried to come to her, but Lord Hensol held him back.

"Go back to the house, William." He approached his guests and held up his hands. "Everything is fine, my friends. I apologize for the excitement. Let us return to the house and freshen up for tea."

The guests started walking back to the house, the gentlemen helping the ladies over fallen logs until they were out of the wood.

Lord Hensol came to her again, the boy fast on his heels. "Please, brother, do not send Miss Steele away."

"Enough! William, you cannot understand these things. You are a boy. Now, do as you are told and return to the house." Lord Hensol's tone was one that broached no argument. William closed his mouth and glared at Lord Hensol. He glanced at Elisabeth, who nodded to let him know that she was well.

"Go on, William. Do as he says. I am fine." Elisabeth nodded to Matthew as well, and they started towards the house. Lord Graham

had waited for them a few paces away and would see that they got home safely.

"Mr Bentley," Lord Hensol turned to the gamekeeper, motioning him over. He had heard the commotion and come to investigate. "Please see that Miss Steele gets back to the manor safely."

Mr Bentley nodded, approaching her. "Yes, My Lord."

Elisabeth tried to stand on her own, wishing she could turn for home right then and there, never looking back.

Lord Hensol would not even look at her. His disregard hurt most of all. Without saying another word to her, he strode off towards the house, leaving her alone with the aged gamekeeper.

It took some effort to get back to the manor, especially having to take it slow with her twisted ankle. Each step sent shooting pain up her leg, making her grit her teeth. Mr Bentley was kind, allowing her to lean on him for support while they hobbled through the garden up to the house. She thanked him at the servants' entrance and went in alone. Elisabeth did not stop at the kitchen for a chat, as she usually did, eliciting a glance between the cook and Mrs Taylor. At the landing leading out into the great hall, Mrs Taylor caught up to her.

"What has happened?"

Elisabeth turned, tears streaming down her face. Mrs Taylor's features immediately softened. "My dear girl, whatever is the matter?"

It took every ounce of strength for Elisabeth not to burst into tears. "I have twisted my ankle. Will you help me to my room?"

Mrs Taylor wrapped her arm around Elisabeth's middle to give her support. She called down to the cook, who came to the stairwell. "Mrs Duncan, please bring some bandages and a cup of tea for Miss Steele. Thank you."

She helped her up the main stairs and to her room, taking it slowly so that Elisabeth would not cause further injury. She helped her sit down on the bed and then lifted her legs. Mrs Taylor helped her take off her boots, examining the ankle. Elisabeth clenched her teeth as she moved the ankle, checking to make sure that it was not broken.

"It will heal. I did not feel a break. However, you must stay off of it for a few days. The boys will not mind, I think. They are much too excited with guests being here for the house party to pay much mind to their studies, I imagine."

Elisabeth's heart twisted. "Oh, Mrs Taylor!" she lamented. "I have been dismissed!" She clapped her hands over her heart and burst into tears. Mrs Taylor sat down, patting her on the shoulder.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Lord Hensol found out I have continued to teach the boys as I saw fit. William was nearly trampled by a horse because of my folly. Oh, Mrs Taylor, it will be a wonder if you ever want to speak to me again after today!" Elisabeth dissolved into more tears.

"Nonsense. It was an accident. And I assume William is uninjured, or I would have heard about it by now."

"William is well, thank the Lord. But it might have been so much worse. And it is all my fault. If only I had listened to Lord Hensol, none of this would have happened." She got up, wincing as she put the slightest pressure on her bad ankle.

"What are you doing?' Mrs Taylor tried to get her to lie back down.

"I cannot stay here another minute. I will return home immediately." She retrieved her carpetbag from under the bed and started to fill it with the little possessions she had.

Mrs Taylor stayed her hands, trying to get her to see reason. "Do not be foolish. You are in no condition to go home. How will you get there?"

Elisabeth set her jaw. "I will walk. It is not far. All I know is, I cannot stay here."

Mrs Taylor became frantic. "You cannot walk in your condition. Stay for a few days and heal. I know that Lord Hensol would not throw you out, especially in your condition. He may be angry, but he is not a monster."

Elisabeth plopped down on the bed again, her ankle throbbing. She was not even sure if she could get her boot back on. She certainly could not walk home without shoes. Her tears came in a rush once more. "I defied him. I betrayed his trust! How can I stay here now that I have been dismissed? And what will become of my brother if his condition worsens? My mother will be furious with me." Squeezing



her eyes closed, fresh tears flowed out onto her cheeks. "I will never see William and Matthew again ..."

Mrs Taylor sat down beside her and wrapped her arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. "I will speak with Lord Hensol if you like. Perhaps, when his temper has cooled, he will see that your teaching methods have only served to help the boys."

"I do not think he is angry with me for the way I have been teaching the boys. I put William and Matthew in danger, and that is unforgivable."

"William is unharmed. It sounds to me like you saved him. Is that not what happened?"

Elisabeth sniffed, wiping her eyes and nose with her handkerchief. "He should not have been in danger in the first place." Her heart twisted. She was in so much pain from her ankle, but her heart hurt even worse. All she knew was that she could not stay at Hensol any moment longer than was necessary. As long as she remained, her shame would be like a noxious fog, choking the life out of her. "I must go."

She finished stuffing her clothing into the carpetbag and stood, clenching her jaw against the pain. "Goodbye, Mrs Taylor."

She leaned down and tried to put her boot on. However, the swelling in her bad ankle would not allow it to go back on.

Mrs Taylor knelt down, feeling the ankle again. "Let me at least wrap

this for you so that it will remain steady." Elisabeth nodded, waiting for the cook to bring the requested bandages and tea. She soon arrived, and Mrs Taylor made her sit still and drink the tea while wrapping her ankle.

When all was ready, she helped her walk down the stairs. She helped steady her by wrapping her arm around her middle, carrying her carpetbag for her in her other hand.

When Mrs Taylor stopped in front of the schoolroom, Elisabeth shook her head, halting in her spot. "No. I cannot face them."

"You must, Elisabeth. Would you leave without saying goodbye to them? They would be heartbroken." Mrs Taylor insisted that she go in and say her goodbyes. Elisabeth sniffed back the tears, wanting to be strong for them.

Mrs Taylor opened the door for her, and Elisabeth edged inside.

"Miss Steele! Are you alright?" William bounded over to her, and Matthew followed.

"Yes, I am quite well. It is only my ankle that was injured." Mrs Taylor brought a chair over for her, and she sat down thankfully. "I have come to say my goodbyes, boys."

William and Matthew exchanged a glance. "No. You cannot leave, Miss Steele. Please!" William burst out. "It is all my fault. If I had not been in the way of the hunt, none of this would have happened." He hung his head.

Elisabeth touched his shoulder and pulled him close for a hug. "Do not think that. None of this is your fault, Will. It is mine. It was my job to protect you, and I failed. I am so sorry." She wiped the tear off his cheek with her thumb, studying his little face and committing it to memory.

She then turned to Matthew and hugged him close. "I shall miss you both so much. It would be improper for you to write to me, as I am sure Lord Hensol would disapprove. However, Mrs Taylor can keep me abreast of what is happening with you, how you are getting on in your studies."

"We shall not continue with our studies. We shall tell Charles so, and make him keep you on!" William crossed his arms stubbornly.

"No. You must not disobey your brother. You both are such bright boys. You must promise me that you will work hard in your studies." Elisabeth stood, unable to bear any more.

They hugged her around her middle, and she placed her hands on their heads. "I shall never forget you, my sweet boys," she whispered.

"And we will never forget you. Even if we live to be a hundred," Matthew said, nuzzling his face into her skirts.

She let out a choked sob and nodded at Mrs Taylor. She wrapped her arm around her middle again and helped her walk out of the room. When they came to the front door, Mrs Taylor asked for one of the stable boys to bring a wagon. Elisabeth sat on the front step, waiting. The sun was shining brilliantly, mocking her with its happy rays.

When the wagon pulled up, Elisabeth bit her lower lip, nervous about getting in. "Will not Lord Hensol be angry that you have used his wagon to send me home?"

"Not at all. If he asks, I will tell him that you were in need of it. He will be gracious, I am sure."

The stable boy helped Elisabeth into the back of the wagon where she could stretch out her leg.

"Write to me," Mrs Taylor said from the back of the wagon. "I shall miss our talks, Elisabeth. May God bless you." She gave her a slight nod and a weak smile. Elisabeth knew this goodbye was as hard for Mrs Taylor as it was for her.

"I will. Thank you for your kindness to me, Mrs Taylor. I hope that we may meet every once in a while and chat. I shall miss our talks, too." The wagon pulled away from the front of the house, and Elisabeth waved goodbye to Mrs Taylor. She waved in return, sadness etched into her face.

As they started down the drive, Elisabeth chanced a look up at the schoolroom windows. She saw William and Matthew's faces pressed against the glass, tears streaming down their faces. Her heart twisted again, and Elisabeth berated herself for being the cause of their pain. She waved to them, blowing them a kiss before they were out of sight.

## Chapter 33

It was no use to say otherwise. Charles was miserable. A week had gone by, and all he could think about was Elisabeth and if she was alright. He was sorry now for the way he had dismissed her.

Amelia, Genevieve, and his other guests had stayed on, causing him even more grief. Amelia especially was starting to get on his nerves. Her haughty attitude made him grind his teeth. In a way, it was as if she thought she had won a battle over Elisabeth.

Had he overreacted on the green when he had come upon the near accident? He was sure now that he had. William had been uninjured, thanks to Elisabeth's stepping in to save him. She had risked her life to keep him from being trampled, and instead of showing his gratitude, he had dismissed her.

"Lord Graham gave me his mother's ring when we got engaged," Anna was saying in response to Amelia's question. He had not heard it, but Amelia had been talking about engagement and marriage ever since the day of the hunt. He was sick to death of her hinting.

"My mother has a ruby and diamond ring that she will give to my fiance whenever he wants to propose. The rubies are from India; the finest money can buy." Amelia looked over at him with a hinting smile. He did not return her smile.

Charles felt guilty. He was leading Amelia on when he knew in his heart that he could never ask her to marry him. His heart belonged to Elisabeth. However, he had made a mess of everything because of his own foolish pride.

If he had been able to talk with Elisabeth privately about the situation, he was sure that he would not have dismissed her. However, with his friends watching and his pride hurt, he had done the only thing he could think of to save face. He could not have his friends thinking that he allowed his employees to cross him without consequences. Now, he was sorry he had done it.

"Excuse me," he said of a sudden, striding to the doorway of the drawing room. "I have some business to attend to."

Amelia let out a disbelieving laugh. "Surely it can wait until after tea?"

"Surely, it cannot. I shall see you all at dinner. Please enjoy yourselves, and let the butler know if you require anything," he said, leaving without a second glance, breathing a sigh of relief to be out from under Amelia's cloying presence.

He made his way to the study, letting out a frustrated sigh. He was in a mess, to be sure. How was he to end his courtship with Amelia without angering her father, making an enemy of one of the most powerful earls of the realm? When he reached the study, he strode behind the desk and sat down in his chair with a huff. He was not sure he cared whether he made an enemy of him or not. All he wanted was to see Elisabeth again.

A knock sounded at the door, and Charles gritted his teeth, hoping to God it was not Amelia come in search of him. "Yes?" he asked testily.

Mrs Taylor opened the door and stepped inside, holding a silver tray.

"We have received a few answers to your advertisement for a new governess, My Lord. Shall I leave them?"

He stood and walked to the door. "Ahh, Mrs Taylor. Yes, thank you. Have you read them yet?"

"Not yet, sir. I thought to let you screen them first." A tinge of sadness touched her voice as she said it. He knew she must be thinking of Elisabeth, knowing they had become close during Elisabeth's time at Hensol.

She stood in the doorway after delivering the letters to him as if she had more to say. "What is it Mrs Taylor? Come in and sit down." He motioned to the desk, going around to take his seat once more. She did as he instructed, sitting straight-backed in the chair in front of his desk. She would not meet his gaze.

"Mrs Taylor?"

She chanced to look at him then, her face lined with worry. "My Lord, as you know, I have been looking after the boys while you search for a new governess."

"Yes, of course, and I thank you for doing so. I know they are not always easy to deal with."

"No, sir, that is not it. Before Miss Steele came, the boys were wild. Unmanageable, even. Now, they are so quiet, so downhearted. My Lord, they will not eat." She twisted her hands. "My Lord, I am so worried about them."

Charles nodded, his worry matching hers. "I see. Perhaps I should go and speak to them."

"I believe that would be wise, sir. They say that they will not eat until you bring back Miss Steele. I do not know what to do."

Charles frowned. "Indeed? Well, do not worry, Mrs Taylor. I have it in hand."

He stood and thanked her, leaving the study to go in search of his brothers. However, when he stepped out of the room, he was met with Lady Amelia, her scowl making her look very unattractive. "How dreadful. That woman seems to have done more harm than good. Your poor brothers!"

He looked at her in disbelief. "Were you eavesdropping on mine and Mrs Taylor's conversation?"

She looked at him with feigned innocence. "I was only happening to pass by. I apologize if it seemed that I was trying to spy."  
Charles bristled. "Miss Steele is the best governess my brothers have ever had."

Amelia's eyes filled with surprise. "I thought you loathed her for having put William and Matthew in danger."

"It is I who deserves loathing. Miss Steele would never have knowingly put them in danger. I see that now."



Her eyes filled with hurt and anger, no doubt realizing the depths of his feelings for a governess. She squared her shoulders and raised her chin. "It does not matter. We will soon be married, and the boys will be sent to school. They will soon have no need of a governess."

Charles realized that he could not keep up with the lie anymore. He bit his lower lip, making his decision. "No, Amelia. We will not be married. Not soon, not ever." He saw his life stretching ahead of him, his life bleak when he tried to picture it with Amelia. He took her hand, trying to make her understand.

She turned on him and jerked her hand away, her face dissolving into an ugly mask of rage. "You cannot do this to me! How can you be in love with a governess? A governess!" Her voice echoed through the great hall, and he was afraid his other guests would come out and see the scene she was making.

"Amelia, please. I am sorry. I did not plan for this to happen. But I cannot lie to you any longer. I love Miss Steele. You deserve to be married to a man who will love you, too."

Amelia's face turned red with fury. She shook her head and backed away from him. "Genevieve!" she called, walking back towards the drawing room. "Genevieve! Come here at once!" Her sister met her in the great hall, and she whispered a few angry words to her. They hurried up the stairs to their guest rooms, no doubt to pack for the long journey home.

A few minutes later, the butler came up to him and informed him that Lady Amelia and her sister had ordered their carriage. "Thank you," Charles said, expecting no less. "I will inform the other guests and see if they would like to return to London with them."

He went into the drawing room, explaining the situation. "Lady Amelia and her sister are preparing to return to London. I know that the party was to last a few more days, but if any of you would like to return home today, I suggest you prepare your belongings. For any of you who would like to stay on, I will offer my personal carriage to take you to London."

The ladies started talking with their companions, and it was decided that they would all return to London. Benjamin and Anna watched from the outskirts, as the decision would not affect them. Benjamin strode over to Charles. "What has happened, old chap?"

Charles let out a breath, feeling oddly relieved that the house party was breaking up. "I have broken off my courtship with Lady Amelia. I am going to follow your example, my friend, and make things right with Miss Steele."

Benjamin's face broke out in a smile. "Well, thank the Lord for that! It took you long enough to do, old chap!"

Anna joined them, whispering as she approached. "I thought I was going to have to suffer Lady Amelia's company for the rest of my life. I am glad you have broken things off with her. I much prefer Miss Steele."

Her eyes twinkled, and he felt his heart lighten at their encouragement. All his other friends might abandon him, as they were close friends with Amelia as well. However, he would be happy with Benjamin and Anna's friendship, even if all his other friends deserted him.

About an hour later, all his guests were ready to depart. Lady Amelia and her sister came down first, watching as their trunks were loaded onto the carriage. Amelia would not look at him as he approached. He turned to Genevieve instead, who gave him a weak smile.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Hensol. It was a most enjoyable week ..."

"Come along, Genevieve," Amelia snapped. She walked out the front door and stretched out her hand to be helped into the carriage. Genevieve turned an apologetic glance towards him, curtsied, and followed her sister without another word.

He said goodbye to the rest of his guests, watching as their things were loaded and they got into the carriages. He waved from the front door. Amelia had covered her window with the curtain, her disdain emanating from the coach. Genevieve risked a wave, and he saw that Amelia nearly slapped her hand down. Genevieve looked away. How could two sisters be so dissimilar?

Benjamin and Anna joined him for a moment, saying their goodbyes. "Do let us know when we may call again. I assume Miss Steele will be back in a few days?"

"That is my plan." Charles smiled.

Anna nodded in approval. "Good. And good luck to you, Charles. I knew from the beginning that you two belong together."

A weight seemed to lift from his chest as he watched the carriages roll down the drive. He let a smile cross his lips, feeling free. He turned and went inside the house, bounding up the steps to the schoolroom.

However, when he reached the schoolroom, the boys were nowhere to be found. He went downstairs again, searching for Mrs Taylor. He found her down in her office just off of the kitchens.

"I am sorry to disturb you in your private office, Mrs Taylor."

"Not at all, sir. Did you come to discuss the advertisements for the new governess?"

"No, I was looking for William and Matthew, but I cannot find them. I thought you might know where they are."

She stood, alarm spreading across her face. "No, sir. I left them in the schoolroom to have their luncheon. I cannot imagine where they have got off to." She followed him back upstairs and helped him search the house. They were nowhere to be found. "Perhaps they went out into the garden, sir. It was one of their favourite spots to go with Miss Steele."

Charles nodded. "Of course. Thank you, Mrs Taylor." He started towards the back of the house, coming out on the patio. He shielded his eyes from the brilliant sunshine, searching the grove of trees for his brothers. He could not wait to see their faces when he told them he was bringing Elisabeth home.

## Chapter 34

Elisabeth sat in the sunshine outside, helping Harriet fold the laundry as she took it off the line. She was doing her best to make herself useful. Since returning home, her mother had not ceased to scold her for losing her position. Elisabeth and Harriet had come outside in hopes of escaping their mother's tales of woe. More than once, she had said they would all end up in the workhouse if Elisabeth did not find a new position soon.

Elisabeth cringed at the idea of her siblings in the workhouse. She had answered several advertisements for a governess. However, she had no references to show her qualifications. Without a reference from Lord Hensol, it would be next to impossible to find another position as a governess. Not that his letter of reference would have been a good one, anyway.

She had thought about going to Lord and Lady Graham and begging for them to take her on. Even a position as a housemaid would help. However, she was in no condition to walk up to their house, much less work the gruelling hours of a housemaid. Not with her ankle still tender from her fall.

"Well, at least you are doing something to help out around the house," her mother said as she came out the front door. She took up the wicker basket full of folded laundry, placing it on her hip. She gave Elisabeth a stern glance and nodded for Harriet to go into the house. "Here, take this and put the clothes away." Harriet took the basket, doing as she was told.

"I've answered several more advertisements for a governess, Mother. I am trying to get another position."

"Trying and doing are two different things. We are not going to survive the winter, much less into next week if you do not find something, and fast." Her mother knelt down in front of her, softening. "I know I have been hard on you since you returned home. I am so worried about John. Lord Hensol sent you away without your pay. And what if John's condition worsens again?"

Elisabeth shook her head. "I know, Mother. I can go up to the house and ask for the wages owed me as soon as I can walk. Do not worry. I am sure that Lord Hensol will not refuse me." She bit her lip, not at all convinced that he would not slam the door in her face. Elisabeth could not confide in her mother, though. She was too overcome with worry for her younger brother, who was still not fully recovered from his illness.

Her mother wiped her tears with her apron and went back into the kitchen without another word. Left alone, Elisabeth berated herself for the hundredth time over. Why had she not simply obeyed Lord Hensol, teaching the boys the way he had asked? Now she had ruined everything, and it was likely to cause the ruin of her family. Not to mention that she would never see William and Matthew again.

Elisabeth closed her eyes, trying to draw in the warmth of the sun. If only the sunshine could chase away the shadows looming over her heart.

Harriet came back outside and joined her on the lawn after she had finished her chores. "I know Mama seems harsh, Elisabeth. It is for worry over John's condition that she lashes out at you so gratingly." She placed a hand on her knee, trying to offer comfort.

Elisabeth patted her hand, thankful for the small show of kindness. "I

know. I do not blame her. She is right to chastise me. It was my own foolish pride that has got us into this mess."

Harriet sat up, a frown creasing her brow. "It is not fair! Who is Lord Hensol to tell a governess how she should teach? Does one tell a horse how to pull a cart?"

Elisabeth laughed. "So you are comparing me to a horse now? Very flattering, I am sure."

"I did not mean it like that, sister. I am sorry."

"No, I am not angry." She smiled. "However, Lord Hensol had every right to demand I teach his brothers to his specifications. It is not for me to say what is best for them. William and Matthew are his brothers, not mine. And even though I feel a certain kinship towards them, it made me forget my place."

"Elisabeth!" a voice called from the road. The girls turned to see Thomas walking up the dirt path leading to the house. He waved his hands over his head, two letters fluttering in the wind.

"What is it?" Thomas bounded up to her, offering her the letters.

"Oh, it is a letter from Mrs Taylor. And a possible answer to the advertisement I sent a few days ago." She tore open the second, saving the letter from Mrs Taylor to read on her own later.

"They have asked me to come to London for an interview!" Elisabeth announced excitedly. "Go and fetch Mama," she told Thomas. Their mother came out from the kitchen on overhearing the news, however.

"Oh, praise be!" her mother gushed. "We are saved!"

"I do not have the position yet, Mother. I should prepare at once and take the next stage for London."

The house was abustle with excitement as the family pitched in to help her get ready. It was only after she had packed that her mother pulled her aside. "How are we to pay for the coach, Elisabeth?"

She had not thought of that. She set her jaw. "I shall go up to Hensol and ask for my wages." It was then that she remembered the letter from Mrs Taylor. "Thomas can walk up with me."

She sat down at the writing desk and opened the letter from Mrs Taylor.

*My dear Miss Steele,*

*I hope this letter finds you well and safe. I have been praying that your ankle mends quickly. How is your recovery going?*

*The boys send their love. They miss you terribly and have taken to not eating since you went away. I do not write this to distress you, for I know that Lord Hensol will straighten them out in due time.*



*Please write to me and let me know how you are getting on. I will let you know if I hear of anyone looking for a governess.*

*With fondest regards,  
M. Taylor*

Her mother waited for her to reveal what was in the letter, hovering over her shoulder. "Well? What is it?"

"The boys are refusing to eat. Oh, what a mess I have made!" she lamented.

"You cannot worry about them now. You must look to the future and that of your family." Her mother took her by the shoulders, helping her to stand. She hobbled down the stairs and out into the kitchen.

Thomas was waiting by the door, ready to assist her to Hensol. Her ankle could only take so much before she tired, and the pain forced her to sit down and rest. It would take them some time to get to the manor.

After two hours of walking, split up by several rests, they finally saw Hensol in the distance. Elisabeth's heart quickened at the thought of going back to beg for her wages. However, there was nothing to be done about it. She needed the money to get another position.

Thomas helped her up the drive and around the back to the servants'

entrance. She knocked loudly, hoping that one of the staff would hear her. One of the scullery maids came to the door, surprise showing on her face when she saw it was Elisabeth. "Miss Steele!"

"Hello. Is Mrs Taylor in? It is a matter of some urgency."

The girl left them at the door while she went in search of Mrs Taylor. It took some time for her to find Mrs Taylor. When she finally came to the door, Elisabeth's ankle was throbbing in pain.

"Elisabeth! I had not thought to see you for some time. Please come to my office, and we can talk. This is your brother, Thomas, is it not?"

"Yes. He has been a great help to me in coming here today," Elisabeth said.

Mrs Taylor motioned for Thomas to follow the scullery maid into the kitchen. "Margaret, tell the cook to give Master Thomas a biscuit and a dish of tea. Thank you."

Thomas followed her into the kitchen while Mrs Taylor led Elisabeth to her study. Elisabeth sat down in the chair she offered, a small table in between them. "What brings you to Hensol?"

Elisabeth took a steadying breath before diving into her request. "I have come to ask for the wages owed me, Mrs Taylor. I know that it is uncouth of me, but I need a fare to London, as I have been asked to come for an interview for a governess position."

Mrs Taylor looked up in alarm. "Oh, my dear, I had not even thought that Lord Hensol would send you away without your wages. I will pay you at once."

"I am sure it is not Lord Hensol's fault. I left so suddenly that he probably did not have a chance to give me my wages." Elisabeth looked around the cozy room as Mrs Taylor went to her desk drawer and pulled out the owed earnings. She let out a sigh of relief.

"I was afraid that Lord Hensol might have instructed you not to pay me. He was very angry the day he dismissed me."

Lord Hensol was angry, but his temper soon cooled. I think he misses you, Elisabeth."

Elisabeth did not want to hear that. She had to move on from her time at Hensol. Besides, Lord Hensol would soon be married, the boys likely sent off to school by his new wife as soon as they could arrange it. She had a feeling Lady Amelia would not want Lord Hensol's younger brother's hanging around when she was trying to establish her dominion as the new mistress of Hensol. Elisabeth's heart went out to them.

"The boys have missed you terribly. I wish there were a way for you to make amends with Lord Hensol." Mrs Taylor handed her the notes and shillings. "Will you wait to see Lord Hensol? I believe he went for a ride earlier."

"No, please do not tell him I was here. I would not want him to change his mind and demand I give back the wages."

Mrs Taylor sat down at the table. "He would not do such a thing, even if he were still angry with you."

Elisabeth was almost afraid to ask. "Are Lady Amelia and his guests still here?"

"Yes. They are up in the drawing room having tea. Shall I call him for you?"

Elisabeth stood as quickly as she could. "No. I will go now. I must catch the London stage this afternoon." She hobbled towards the door, but Mrs Taylor beat her to it.

"Please, be careful in London, Elisabeth. Are you sure that you are well enough to travel?"

"I do not have a choice. My brother is still battling his fever, and my family must eat. I need to get this position to save my family from ruin." Elisabeth gave her a weak smile. "If I do not get it, I would be most appreciative if you hear of anything, no matter what it is. I will be a housemaid if I need to."

"Of course," Mrs Taylor said. She walked her and Thomas to the door, Thomas beaming at the scullery maid as he left the kitchen. Elisabeth spied a bit of romance sparking between the two. Rolling her eyes, she told him to come away.

"I will pray your journey is a success, Elisabeth," Mrs Taylor said.

"Thank you," Elisabeth replied, wrapping her arm around Thomas'

shoulder as they walked away.

## Chapter 35

Charles bounded down the patio steps, searching for William and Matthew along the hedgerow. He remembered Miss Steele taking them beyond the hedgerow and sitting under a large maple. As he rounded the corner of the hedge, he saw the boys sitting on a blanket, an atlas laid out in front of them.

He waited to make his presence known, wondering what they were doing. As he came closer, he could hear their voices echoing out over the garden, William calling instructions to his brother. "Unfurl the mast, First Mate Matty!"

"Aye, aye, Captain William!"

Matthew saluted him and shimmied up the tree to do as he was told. He shielded his eyes from the sun, a paper hat perched on top of his head. "Mexico off the port bow!" he announced. Charles smiled at their antics.

"Very good. Come down, and we will ready the ship to come into port."

"There were no ports back in 1521," Matthew whispered.

"Right, I had forgotten," William whispered back. "Well, we shall ready to release anchor, then!"

"Aye, Captain!"

"We will row to the shore and make our way to the interior. There we will find the legendary city of Tenochtitlan!"

"It will be a difficult journey, and we shall need the help of the natives to find the island."

"Of course! We will give them gifts in exchange for their help."

Charles closed the distance between them, clearing his throat as he approached. "Hello, boys. May I join your expedition?"

Matthew looked at him in shock, keeping up the game. "You are walking on water, Charles!"

"Oh? I am at that!" He scrambled over to the blanket. "I'm afraid my shoes and socks are wet now."

William gave him a wary stare. "What are you doing out here? You were always cross with us when Miss Steele would bring us out to the garden for our lessons."

Charles hung his head momentarily, kneeling on the blanket, so he was eye-level with them. "I was wrong to be cross with her."

William crossed his arms over his chest. He was not going to let Charles off the hook that easily. That much was certain. "Yes, you were."

"Did Miss Steele teach you all those things about Mexico?"

"Yes, of course, Miss Steele taught us," William says. "Whether you believe it or not, she was teaching us with her 'childish games' as you called them. She made learning fun, Charles. She was the best governess we ever had!"

"She's the only governess you had long enough to find out," Charles replied, feeling guilty.

William touched his shoulder, softening in his defence of Miss Steele. "She didn't treat us like we were stupid. She never discouraged questions. We enjoyed learning the way she taught us, brother. Please, bring her back. We miss her."

Matthew had come down from the tree and took his brother's hand. He placed his little hands on either side of Charles's face. "You miss her, too. I know it."

Charles smiled. He knew now that it was wrong of him to put Miss Steele in the position of having to change her teaching style. She had done an excellent job with the boys, and her presence had brought life back into their home.

"I know I have made a mess of everything. But I want to make things



right. Will you boys help me with something?"

William and Matthew glanced at each other. "What could we do?"

Charles stood and took their hands. "We are going to get Miss Steele back!" He helped them gather the blanket and the atlas, heading towards the house.

"Oh, good. Now, Miss Steele can come to South America with us, after all!" Matthew said excitedly.

"She will go everywhere with us," Charles said, his heart swelling at the thought of seeing her.

The boys walked inside with him and deposited the blanket and atlas in the drawing room. Striding to the front door, he was surprised to see Benjamin had returned. "Back already?" he asked, smiling as his friend spoke with the butler.

"Yes. Anna left her shawl in one of the guest rooms and asked me to come and fetch it for her."

"Of course. Mrs Taylor will help you with whatever you need." Charles nodded to the butler, who would go in search of Mrs Taylor so she could assist Benjamin.

"Where are you off to? You look like you are on a mission."

Charles smiled. "I am going to Miss Steele's cottage to ask if she will be my wife." He glanced at his brothers, who shared the same surprised and delighted looks when they heard what Charles was planning. They had been hoping he was going to hire her back as their governess. He was sure that it would be a pleasant surprise that she was actually going to be their sister-in-law.

That is if she would accept him. He had made so many mistakes along the way. He would not blame her if she did not want to speak to him ever again.

Benjamin clapped him on the back, genuinely delighted for his friend. "Well, that is the second-best news I have heard all day!"

Charles laughed. "The second best? What was the first?"

Benjamin pulled him aside and lowered his voice. "Anna has just told me that I am to be a father."

Charles beamed. "Well, that is good news! Congratulations, my friend."

"Thank you! Anna will be pleased to hear about you and Miss Steele. However, I know she will be a bit disappointed, as well. She had hoped to hire Miss Steele on as our governess when the time came."

Charles laughed. "Yes. I hope she will be much too busy with our own family."

Benjamin smiled. "Of course."

Mrs Taylor appeared at the landing, holding a shawl over her arm. She approached Lord Graham and handed him the article. "Here you are, sir."

Benjamin took it and thanked her. "You are a treasure, Mrs Taylor. Lady Graham will be most grateful." He turned back to Charles. "Let me know how it goes with Miss Steele."

"I will. Thank you." Charles saw Benjamin to the door. When he turned back to Mrs Taylor and his brothers, he saw the stricken look on Mrs Taylor's face.

"What is the matter, Mrs Taylor?"

"I am sorry if it seems impertinent, sir. But are you looking for Miss Steele?"

"I am. I mean to make things right with her." He turned around and meant to walk out the door.

"Sir, she has gone to London to look for a new governess's position."

Charles swung around. "A new position? In London? When did you find this out?"

"She was here earlier this morning, sir, before the guests left. She came asking about the wages owed her. I knew you would want her to have her earnings, so I gave them to her. She said she needed them to get fares to London so she might go to her interview."

"Did she leave already?"

"I do not know, sir. I assume she was leaving on the noon stage."

Mrs Taylor barely had time to finish her sentence, for Charles was already headed out the door. "Watch over the boys for me until I return, will you?"

He hurried out the door, the boys and Mrs Taylor watching from the front stoop as he travelled down the drive. "Of course, sir!" she called, placing her hands on the boys' shoulders. "Come along, Master William. Master Matthew. Lord Hensol will sort everything out."

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Charles walked briskly to Miss Steele's house. It occurred to him that he had never been to her home, but undoubtedly one of the village residents could direct him. He was not mistaken, and a small boy travelling up the road with a farm dog helped lead him to the cottage.

He walked through the gate and knocked on the door. A young woman came to the door, her eyes growing wide when she saw him. "Good day, Miss. My name is Lord Hensol. I am looking for Miss Steele."

"Lord Hensol!" She closed her mouth and curtsied. "Do come in, sir." She opened the door wide and was greeted by an older woman holding a young girl on her hip. She quickly set the child down, instructing her to go outside and play. Mrs Steele wiped her hands on her apron and extended her hand.

"How do you do, Lord Hensol." She offered him a chair, which he declined.

"No, thank you, madam. Perhaps on another day. I am here enquiring about your eldest daughter? Is she at home?"

Shaking her head, she glanced at the daughter, who had answered the door. "I am afraid she and my eldest boy, Tom, have gone to London. She heard of a governess position there and has gone to interview for it. They left not an hour ago on the noon stage."

"That is bad luck, is it not?" Charles turned away, meaning to leave. "I will not prey upon your hospitality any longer. Forgive me, madam, for intruding on your day."

"Not at all, sir. May I ask ..." she hesitated. "Are you here to offer her position as governess once again?"

Charles turned, shaking his head. "No, madam." Her face fell. "Might I have a few moments of your time, Mrs Steele? In private?"

She glanced at her daughter, sending her out into the yard with the other girls. "Of course, sir." They sat down at the kitchen table. He let out a long breath, leaning his elbows on the table.

"Mrs Steele, I have made a terrible mistake concerning your daughter. I have come to see if she would agree to be my wife. With your consent, of course," he added. He wanted to chuckle at the look on her face. He was sure that if he blew, she would fall over.

"Your wife?"

"Yes, Mrs Steele. I love your daughter very much. I wish to ask for her hand in marriage."

"Well, that is something!" she exclaimed. She stood, going around behind her chair and resting her hands on the back.

"When will she be returning from London?"

"I assume they will return tomorrow afternoon. If she were hired for the position, she would need to gather her things and return. Of course, now, she will not need the governess position."

"Indeed. That is if she will accept me."

"She would be a fool not to!" her mother said, quickly realizing her faux pas. "I do not mean that she should take you for your status, sir. I have watched her closely over the last few weeks. A mother can always tell when her child is in love. And she is certainly in love with you, Lord Hensol."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

He felt relief at her confidence. He bowed and left, saying that he would return at noon the next day, hopefully in time to meet the coach. He nodded to the little girl playing in the yard, who promptly went to hide behind the older sister's skirts. "Good day to you," he said, smiling in their direction.

"Sir?" The older girl stepped forward, worry lining her face. "Is it true that you have come to give my sister her governess position back?"

Charles stepped closer to her, studying her face. She and Elisabeth looked as if they might be twins. "Not exactly."

She curtsied, "I am sorry for my rudeness, sir. My name is Harriet Steele. I am Elisabeth's younger sister."

"I see the resemblance in you. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Lord Hensol at your service," he introduced himself.

"She will be happy to see you. She has been pining ever since she returned home." Harriet walked him to the gate, smiling as they strolled along.

"Has she? Well, I have been pining away as well. We shall remedy this whole mess tomorrow when your sister returns. Have no worries about that."

He turned when they came to the gate. "I am glad of that, sir." She smiled up at him.

"Until tomorrow," he said, tipping his hat.



## Chapter 36

Elisabeth boarded the stage later that afternoon, travelling to London with her little brother as her companion. It would have been foolhardy for her to travel alone as a single, young woman on the public stage. And although it had cost a little extra for a fare for Thomas, her mother had insisted that he go along.

"Do not worry, Mother. I will keep her safe."

Her mother hugged him tightly and smiled down at him. "I know you will, son." She chucked him under the chin. "You look so much like your father ..."

Elisabeth said a tearful goodbye to her mother. If she were to get the governess position in London, it would mean months or even years between her family visits. It would break her heart to be separated from them. However, she could not worry about that now. She had to think about what was best for them, and especially John.

The long journey was exhausting, and even though her ankle had healed to an extent, it still pained her. The jostling and constant bumping of the coach made her ankle joint ache.

Thomas slept for most of the journey, leaning on the window as a pillow. They arrived in London late that night, lodging in one of the nearby inns for the night. In the morning, they hired a hackney cab to take them to the address where the interview would be held.

It was a jarring experience, but Thomas took it all in stride. He had never been to town before, and the sights and sounds filled him with amazement. "I would love to live in London someday. It all seems so exciting."

"And rancid," Elisabeth said, holding a handkerchief over her nose. "Not me. I much prefer the country life with its beautiful landscapes and fresh air." Thomas did not seem to hear, though. He was too enthralled with his surroundings.

The house was in the fashionable part of London, the street lined with cherry trees. Thomas jumped out of the hackney first and then helped Elisabeth down. "Thank you," she said to the driver and handed him the fare. They had just enough to get a cab back to the public coach boarding site and their return ticket for the stage.

She took a deep breath as Thomas helped her up the steps of the lavish home, hoping that she looked decent for the interview. After driving all night long to get there, she was not sure her hair did not look a mess and knew she had purple bags under her eyes.

Thomas knocked on the door and stood aside so Elisabeth could do the talking. When the butler opened the door, he looked her up and down, sneering at her homely dress. "Good day, sir. My name is Miss Elisabeth Steele. I have come to interview for the governess position."

"I am sorry, Miss. But the position has already been filled." He went to close the door, but she stopped him with a hand on the frame.

"Already filled? But I have travelled all night with my brother to come for this interview."

"I apologize, Miss. Lady Dunlevey interviewed a young woman this morning and has given the position to her. There is nothing I can do." He then closed the door in their faces, leaving Elisabeth breathless. What was she to do now?

Thomas took her hand, helping her down the steps. "It is going to be alright. I will quit school and find work as a field hand."

"No, Thomas. You cannot quit school. No, I will find other means of earning. I will become a housemaid if I have to." In all likelihood, their mother would make Harriet quit school, and they would both have to become housemaids for them to make ends meet. It was unfair for Harriet. She was so close to finishing her studies.

"Come on. Let us go back to the station. There is nothing more for us to do here."

Thomas nodded and looked for a cab. He soon found one, and they headed back in the direction they had come. Elisabeth did her best not to cry. All this had been for naught, and on top of that, they had spent her meagre earnings to get to London.

When they arrived at the station, they were told that the next stage would not be leaving for a few more hours. They decided to stroll along some of the small shops that lined the street. They came upon a milliner's shop, some lovely yellow ribbons displayed in the window. She nudged Thomas. "Come on. We should go inside and get some ribbons for the girls. Those would look lovely in their dark hair."

Thomas helped her inside, offering his arm for her to lean on. "Do we

have enough?"

"We do. There are a few shillings left over after buying our fares. Besides, they are likely to be a few pennies each. That will leave us with just enough to buy some refreshments during our journey." Elisabeth put on a brave face for her brother, hating that he started to worry about money. Harriet deserved a little luxury since she would soon be giving up her education and would need to help with the family income.

As they entered the shop, they heard the voices of the clerks speaking with another lady customer. Elisabeth went to the window and fingered the yellow silk ribbons. "Please do not touch the window displays," one of the milliners came up to her, and she quickly removed her hand.

"Of course, I do apologize ..." When Elisabeth turned around, her heart nearly stopped. Lady Amelia was standing behind her and had been discussing a new dress with one of the other milliners. Her jaw nearly dropped to the floor, and she quickly looked away. However, it was too late. Lady Amelia had seen her and promptly came over.

"Well, if it is not Miss Steele. Whatever are you doing here in London?"

Elisabeth steeled herself for the attack she knew was coming. "I am in town interviewing for a new position, My Lady." She was not about to tell her that her search for a new job had turned up empty. No doubt, Lady Amelia was in the shop ordering things for her trousseau.

"Indeed?"

Elisabeth lowered her gaze. "Yes." She looked for the milliner and saw that she was bringing out a bolt of white silk for Amelia to look at.

"I am ordering a new wardrobe. I am sure that Lord Hensol's proposal will be coming any day now." Lady Amelia looked down her nose at her. "It is good that you should be looking for a new position here in town. I will offer you one word of caution, though."

"Oh? And what is that, pray, tell?"

"Stay away from entangling yourself with your mistress's husbands. They will not be as kind and understanding as I have been."

Elisabeth sucked in a breath. She had never gone chasing after Lord Hensol's affections. Lady Amelia gave her a haughty smile and turned away to speak with the milliner.

She glanced at Thomas, who was bristling with rage. "How dare she ..." He took a step towards her, ready to give her a piece of his mind.

"Do not, Thomas. It will only get you into trouble." Tears were brimming in her eyes. She should not care what Lady Amelia thought of her. Even still, her words hurt. The milliner's assistant came up to her and asked if she could assist her.

"No, thank you," she replied and quickly turned to leave the shop. Limping out of the doorway, she allowed Thomas to help her across the street. They went into the small tavern beside the stagecoach

station and ordered some bread and cheese. Thomas could see that she was still upset and tried to comfort her.

"Do not listen to a word that awful woman said. She is just jealous of you."

Elisabeth gave a derisive laugh. "Yes, she is jealous." She did not want to discuss her troubles with her brother. How would she tell her mother that she lost the position before even having had a chance to interview? If only she had been able to board the stage immediately after receiving the letter yesterday! Now it would likely be weeks before she could start working again. And even longer still before she was able to collect her first quarter's wages. Thomas seemed to guess at her thoughts and took her hand. He gave it a light squeeze and smiled.

"Everything is going to be alright, sister. I promise." His eyes held such hope that she did not have the heart to tell him otherwise.

Smiling at him, she squeezed his hand back. "I know. You are right. As long as we have each other, I know we can weather any storm."

Thomas nodded and took a bite of his bread. He looked out the window, watching as the people passed by. His fascination with the city had only increased, it would seem. Perhaps he would follow in their father's footsteps and become a barrister one day. Elisabeth surmised that he would do well in the big city.

The time passed slowly as they waited for the stage to depart. Finally, they were able to board, Thomas scooting in close to her. The outbound stage was more crowded than the inbound stage. However, Elisabeth knew that the passengers would thin as they travelled

further from the city.

As soon as they were underway, Thomas leaned away from her and looked at the passing landscape. Elisabeth was left alone with her thoughts, wondering what would become of them all. It would hurt her pride to do so, but she would need to go to the Graham estate and ask if they would hire her as a housemaid. Would Lady Graham even deem to speak to her now she had been dismissed from the Hensol household in disgrace? All she could do was try. She could not afford to be without a means to earn for long. Her little brother was counting on it. Her whole family was.

"You and your son have a long journey?" a gentleman sitting across from them asked. Most of the other passengers were nodding off, lulled to sleep by the rocking coach.

She glanced over at her brother, who had fallen asleep as well, and shook her head. "He is my brother." She was unsure if she should be offended that he thought her old enough to have a twelve-year-old son.

He grinned at her, looking her up and down. "Ahh, then you are unmarried, I presume?"

She cleared her throat, uncomfortable under his scrutiny. "I am single, yes."

"I can't imagine you will be for long. Pretty gal like you must have no shortage of suitors."

She smiled weakly, trying to subtly nudge Thomas awake. She did not answer the man, growing uncomfortable as he continued to gaze at

her. "Whereabouts are you from then?"

She told him the county, being careful not to let him know exactly where she hailed from. He seemed to sense her evasiveness, frowning at her. "Do not worry, lass. I would no' follow you to your home if that is wha' you're afraid of." He crossed his arms and turned away from her. She was sorry she had offended him but was glad that he had stopped questioning her.

Perhaps that was the other option, besides making Harriet quit school. If she married, she would not have to work. However, finding a husband was only half the trouble. Convincing him to help her care for her family was another matter entirely.



## Chapter 37

Charles, William, and Matthew climbed into the carriage the next afternoon, hoping to be at the Steele house in time to greet the stage. The boys were excited to be going along with him, eager to see Elisabeth's siblings. They had stayed up late the previous night, setting up a special surprise for Elisabeth. The boys were so excited they could hardly sit still.

"Now, Matthew, I must charge you not to spoil the secret."

Matthew nodded and saluted. "You can count on me, Captain!"

Charles chuckled. "Good."

They arrived at the Steele home in plenty of time, for the stage was not due to arrive until noon. Harriet, Mary, and Mrs Steele met them at the gate. Her mother was aflutter with nerves when they approached. "Oh, Lord Hensol. Elisabeth and her brother have not come home yet, and it is nearly noon. Do you think something could have happened?"

"Do not fear madam," Charles replied. "The roads are dry, and I am sure they will be here at any moment."

"Well, do come inside and have some tea while you are waiting, sir." Mrs Steele motioned for Harriet to open the gate.

"There they are!" Mary said, pointing over the gate. Charles turned and saw Elisabeth limping down the dirt road, Thomas carrying her carpetbag behind her. He turned away from the gate and started towards her. When she recognized him, she froze on the road. Thomas halted for a moment until he saw Charles walking towards him. Sensing that they would want some privacy, he whispered something to Elisabeth. He took the carpetbag the rest of the way to the cottage.

Elisabeth said nothing as he approached, stricken with his presence. How he wished he could take her into his arms and allay all her fears. "Hello, Elisabeth."

She closed her eyes at the familiar mention of her name. She would not meet his gaze. "Lord Hensol," she whispered. He took a tentative step towards her, and when she did not back away, he took another.

"I have come to ask you to come back to Hensol Manor with the boys and me."

She closed her eyes, shaking her head. He could see she was holding back tears. "I cannot, sir."

"Why not?" He took another small step towards her. His face fell, and he suddenly became worried that she had taken the position in London. She still would not meet his gaze, her lower lip quivering.

"Please, Elisabeth. William and Matthew miss you. We all do," he added. He closed the rest of the distance between them and lifted her chin, willing her to look at him. Tears started to roll down her lovely cheeks, and he quickly wiped them away.

Shaking her head, she cried all the more." I cannot go back with you! You're about to be married ..." she blubbered, unable to finish.

"I am not going to marry Lady Amelia." He wiped another tear, her head snapping up after his comment.

"What? Why?" she asked. "I just saw her in London, and she said you were going to propose to her any day now." She searched his eyes, her eyes darting back and forth.

"I'm in love with someone else," he said softly. She was so beautiful, even after a long journey, and her eyes red from crying.

She caught her breath. "Then you are not engaged to Lady Amelia?"

"No, I am not." He smiled, tucking her hair behind her ear. He gathered her close and was about to lean down and kiss her when her mother interrupted.

"Come inside, the two of you. I have made a pot of tea, and you can rest your ankle from the journey, Elisabeth."

Charles halted, smiling down at Elisabeth. All in good time.

He offered her his arm, and they walked to the cottage together. When they reached the house, Charles took Elisabeth's mother aside, lowering his voice so only she could hear. "Mrs Steele. I should very much like to invite you and your family up to Hensol for dinner this

evening. The boys and I have come up with a surprise for Miss Steele."

She turned her head, her eyes questioning. "Oh? What kind of surprise?"

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. She let out a gasp, smiling broadly. "Of course, we should be honoured to come to dinner this evening."

"Excellent. We shall all pile into the carriage and go up as soon as we finish tea. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Yes, indeed, sir!"

When he turned, Elisabeth was looking at him, questions blazing in her eyes. "Quiet, everyone!" He held up his hand and whistled to get their attention. The children turned to him, quieting their excited chatter. "Ready yourselves, for after tea, we are all going up to Hensol this evening!"

The children burst into cheers, talking excitedly again about visiting the manor. Elisabeth stood, leaning on the kitchen table for support. When he neared, she wore a worried expression. "Are you sure that Hensol is ready for the wild Steele clan?"

He touched her hand, squeezing it slightly to reassure her. "Most certainly. Besides, Will, Matty, and I have a surprise for all of you."

Elisabeth raised her brows. "A surprise? What kind of surprise might you be planning?"

"It is a good one, you will see. However, I cannot reveal it, for I have been put under strict orders by Captain William."

"Oh? So the boys are the ones who have planned this surprise?"

"They have indeed."

"Curious," she said, eyeing him suspiciously. "Well, we must gobble up our tea so that we can learn what the surprise is."

The children sat down around the room, visiting with William and Matthew as they drank their tea and ate the delicious biscuits that Mother Steele had made. It was as if they were having a family reunion.

"Mother? What is going on?"

Everyone turned to see that John had come down the stairs, rubbing his eyes against the bright sunlight.

Mrs Steele rushed to her son, placing her hand on his forehead. Looking back at Elisabeth, her eyes welled with tears. "The fever is gone!"

Elisabeth joined her mother at the bottom of the stairs, hugging her brother. "Thank God! You have had us so worried!"

The rest of the family gathered around John, offering heartfelt thanks to God that he was recovered and asking him if he needed anything. "Well, I am quite hungry," he replied, drawing a laugh from the joined company.

Charles stepped forward, taking his hat in hand. "If it is acceptable to you, Mrs Steele, dinner will be ready at Hensol in under a half-hour. Shall we pack into the carriage and go forthwith?"

"Of course. Let me just help John get ready, and we shall be with you directly, sir." She smiled and ushered her youngest son up the stairs. Elisabeth told the other children to go outside and play while she and Harriet cleaned up the kitchen.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she turned to him. "I cannot believe it. A few days ago, John seemed to be edging towards death's door, and today it seems a miracle that he is out of bed. I could die a happy woman right now!" She started clearing the table, and he went around the other side and collected dishes with her. She looked at him in horror.

"What are you doing?"

"I am helping clear the table; what does it look like I am doing?" He laughed.

"No, please, do not trouble yourself. You are an earl and should not be

clearing a table." She came around to his side of the table and tried to take the dishes from him.

He held them away from her, walking over to the sink and putting them in so Harriet could do them. "Yes, I know what I am, and I am not above work. Besides, they are only dishes. I can dry, too, if that is required."

Harriet snickered as she scrubbed the tea things but did not insert herself into the conversation.

"Absolutely, not," Elisabeth said, her face breaking into a smile. "Harriet will wash, and I will dry. Why do you not join the children outside? I am sure William and Matthew would like to show you the little brook where they went fishing earlier this summer."

Charles neared her as she turned around at the sink to start helping Harriet dry the dishes. "I would much rather stay here with you."

Harriet rolled her eyes. "My goodness, I am not going to get anything with you lot here. Lord Hensol, would you mind taking my sister for a short walk? She has not got out in the sunshine very often since her return home."

Elisabeth turned on Harriet, shocked that she would talk to them in such a manner. However, Charles was grateful to her. "I would be honoured. Shall we, Miss Steele?"

Elisabeth looked as if she might protest some more but took his arm in the end and let him lead her outside into the yard. The younger

children were tearing about playing hide and seek. Thomas watched from the sidelines, laughing at their antics.

"Why do you not join them, Tom?" Elisabeth called.

"I am too old for such games," he replied, crossing his arms.

"He is quite the mature young man. How old is he?" Charles asked as they strolled.

"He turned twelve in May."

"And what is it he wants to be when he is grown?"

"During our trip to London, I thought he might make a good barrister, like our father. He loved town, although I do not share his sentiments. I think he would do well there."

"Has he expressed interest in becoming a barrister?" A plan was formulating in Charles' mind. It would require hard work on Thomas' part, but he seemed to be an industrious and responsible young man.

"No. However, I believe it was a wish that was dear to my father's heart. They are much alike in character and personality. My father was a wonderful barrister. Thomas would be as well if that is what he chose."



"I should like to help him in any way I can." Charles clasped his hands behind his back, having her response. Her eyes filled with tears afresh, and she nodded, looking at him with gratitude.

"You have done so much already," she said quietly.

Chuckling, he halted under an aspen tree. "I have given you a lot of grief, that is certain."

"No, I mean it. You employed me, and I suspect you have helped John in ways you are not saying. I am grateful. You will never know how much."

He touched her hand, glancing at the children as they continued to play. "I would do anything for you and your family." She lowered her gaze, blushing.

"Well, I would certainly like to have my position back as William and Matthew's governess. I cannot tell you how much I have missed them over the last week."

Charles feigned worry. "I am sorry," he stuttered. "I have decided to send William off to school a little early, and Matthew will soon follow. We will soon not need a governess."

Her face fell. "That is a shame. How will Matthew stay on with his lessons if there is no one to guide him?"

"I have decided to take it upon myself to be his teacher. I do not see anything especially difficult about teaching." Charles could hardly contain his amusement when she raised her eyebrows and looked straight ahead. Soon, all would be revealed, and she would forgive him for leading her astray. "Never fear, I think there is another position you will be suited to."

"Oh? And what is that?"

Charles was saved having to answer as Mrs Steele came out of the house with John in tow. "Ahh, it looks as if we are ready to depart. Shall we?"

## Chapter 38

Lord Hensol helped Elisabeth's mother into the carriage as they all readied to go on up to Hensol. He handed Elisabeth and Harriet in, along with little Mary. William and Thomas offered to ride with the coachman outside, while John and Matthew would squeeze in with the rest of them. It was an awkward ride, although Lord Hensol did not seem to mind. He seemed to be all smiles today, and it made her hope that he felt more for her than she had previously imagined.

She had not allowed herself to hope that he would actually break with tradition and ask her to marry him. It had happened for Anna Graham. Why not for her? Even still, she squashed down the thought, feeling that the disappointment would be too hard to bear if he did not ask her.

Matthew was eager to tell her all that had been going on at Hensol while she had been away. "You would be proud of Will and me. We did not want to continue with our studies at first, but then we thought that you would be more disappointed in us if we did not, even though you were not the one teaching us."

"You are correct in that. I would not be so much disappointed as sad, though. When you leave your education by the wayside, you only hurt yourself."

Lord Hensol nodded at that sentiment, and Matthew did as well. "That is why we knew that we could not give up."

"I am proud of you, Matthew. Well done. And what have you learned while I have been away?"

"We sailed to Mexico and learned about the conquest of Tenochtitlan."

"Indeed? How did it go?" She wished she had been there to see them using their imagination as they learned about the conquest.

"We only got as far as the coast because that is when Charles came out and told us he was going to bring you home."

Elisabeth locked her gaze with Lord Hensol, his eyes holding a fathomless tenderness. "Did you?" she whispered.

"I did."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Can you give me no hint as to what the surprise is?"

"You will find out soon enough," he said, his eyes dancing. They pulled into the drive, and the children leaned out the windows to marvel at the grand manor. However, Lord Hensol seemed to only have eyes for her.

He helped her out of the carriage, allowing her to lean on him since her ankle was still quite sore. Lord Hensol then turned his attention to her sister and mother, ensuring everyone was accounted for before they walked into the house.

"Miss Steele. Would you show everyone into the library, please?"

Elisabeth turned to him, confused. "The library? Not the dining room?"

"No, not yet. I have made sure there are refreshments laid for the festivities. But no, first to the library and then to the dining room."

Lord Hensol took William and Matthew aside for a moment, whispering to them. Elisabeth gave Harriet a curious glance and then ushered her family into the library.

"Come along. I suppose this has to do with William and Matthew's surprise for you all," Elisabeth said cheerily. The suspense of what the surprise could be was driving her to distraction.

They walked through the grand hall, their awed voices echoing through the cavernous room. None of them except Elisabeth had ever stepped foot in such a lavish household. As they rounded the corner and entered the library, Elisabeth caught her breath. The room had been set up as a stage, just as she and the boys had done several weeks before.

Memories of that night flooded her mind, her heartbeat quickening. "Do sit down, all of you. William, Matthew, and I have written a play, and we should like to perform it for you. Mrs Taylor will be in directly with a tray full of sweets and tea. Do make yourselves comfortable in the meantime, and the performance will get started shortly."

Lord Hensol went behind the quilts hung to act as the stage curtains.

William and Matthew appeared a few moments later and went straight behind the curtains.

"What is this?" Harriet asked, leaning over to Elisabeth as they were seated.

"I have no idea," she replied, smiling. She would never dream that Lord Hensol would agree to act in one of his brother's plays. Not in a thousand years. However, he had surprised her several times since coming to Hensol. Perhaps he was also a great actor, as well as handsome, generous, and charming.

Mrs Taylor entered with the promised tray, and Elisabeth stood to help her serve. "Oh, no. Thank you, but no. I have been given strict instructions that you are the guest of honour and should not lift a finger this evening." She winked at her. "But I am ever so glad to see you again, Elisabeth." She passed the sweets around and then set the tray on the side table, pouring tea for Elisabeth, Harriet, and her mother.

William stepped out on stage when everyone had been served and cleared his throat. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!" he announced loudly. "This evening, we are pleased to present to you an original play, written by my own hand, in honour of Miss Steele. Please enjoy "The Dragon and The Maiden."

They all clapped, all the while Elisabeth's cheeks started to redden. She wondered if this would be similar to the play William and Matthew had written about Lord Hensol being a dragon.

William bowed when the applause died down, her siblings quieting. "Once upon a time, there was a young boy who was all alone in the

world ..." Lord Hensol stepped out on stage, dressed in a simple white shirt and breeches. "... He grew very angry over time and was unpleasant to the people in his village. One day, an enchantress decided to turn him into a dragon, foretelling that a beautiful, young maiden would someday break the spell.

"When the boy saw that he was a dragon, he flew away and made his home in a dark cavern ..." Lord Hensol pretended to flap his wings and climb a ladder leaning against one of the bookshelves. "Sometimes, he would come out and burn the farmer's fields because he was so angry about his fate." Lord Hensol then came down from the ladder and pretended to breathe fire as he passed before the audience.

Elisabeth laughed along with the rest of her family, astonished that Lord Hensol joined in the silliness. Her siblings squealed with delight as he growled and breathed fire as he passed back to the ladder. He buried his head in his forearm, pretending to go to sleep.

"Then, one day, many years later, a young maiden came along. She was a shepherdess, with beautiful red hair and blue-green eyes. When the dragon saw her, he flew out and captured the young maiden..."

Matthew came out, dressed in an oversized skirt, a mop of red yarn over his head to serve as a wig. "I am the fair maiden," he said in a high-pitched voice. He walked along the stage, Lord Hensol watching from the shadows. He then jumped off the ladder and pounced on Matthew, growling as he captured the 'maiden.'

"You are mine!" he yelled. Matthew and Lord Hensol climbed up the ladder, Elisabeth gasping at the thought of it breaking under their combined weight. "I am a lonely dragon. I will make you my prisoner!"

Matthew shied away from Lord Hensol. "Oh, no! I have a family. Please, let me go!"

"Never!"

The children gave a collective gasp. William stepped forward and started to narrate. "For a long time, the maiden was scared of the dragon. But over time, she realized that he was just lonely and sad. They started to talk at night after he came back from stealing sheep for his meals. She began to tell him stories from the books she had read when she was little."

Lord Hensol and Matthew came down from the ladder and sat on the stage, pretending that the maiden was telling the dragon a story.

The room quieted, the audience on the edge of their seats. "Many months passed, and all the while, the maiden's family had been searching for her. The villagers came upon the cave and saw that the young maiden and the dragon were sitting together. The maiden's mother rushed into the cave and took her out of harm. But the maiden did not want to go."

Lord Hensol and Matthew pretended to cling to each other as invisible hands pried them apart. Matthew rushed behind the curtain, William joining him. Lord Hensol was left alone, looking dejected and miserable. He faced the audience, taking a few steps closer to them. "I was so lonely that I let my anger and hurt push people away. But then the maiden came and helped me see that there is still beauty in this life. Now that she is gone, everything that is good and beautiful is gone."



Lord Hensol turned to Elisabeth, the play-acting falling away. "When she went away, the light passed out of my life. Elisabeth, you made this house a place of adventure and wonder again. You brought life back into our dreary existence."

Elisabeth's smile faded, realizing that he was not reciting lines but was speaking from the heart. Her heart raced, and she gulped as he stepped off the 'stage' and extended his hand. "Elisabeth, I need you for this last part of our play."

She looked over at her mother and Harriet, who both had tears in their eyes. Elisabeth took his hand and walked to the centre of the makeshift stage with him. "I was wrong to dismiss you. However, your absence made me see there is no one on earth I would rather be with, no one else I want to spend my life with. The boys were right when they put on that first play with you. I had closed my heart away and became an intolerable dragon."

Elisabeth let out a nervous laugh. William and Matthew slipped out from the side of the curtains and went to sit down to watch the end of the performance. He took both her hands in his, and the on-lookers seemed to fade away. "Elisabeth Steele, I never knew I could feel like this. You have helped me see that life is not all about rules and schedules and reputations. You really did bring life back to Hensol, after so much heartache and pain. I would never want to be another minute without you." He knelt on one knee, squeezing her hand. "Elisabeth, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Elisabeth could hardly believe what she was hearing. She covered her mouth with her hand as a sob escaped her lips. Lord Hensol reached in his pants pocket and pulled out an exquisite sapphire and diamond ring, holding it out to her.

The room seemed to hold its breath as they waited for her reply.

"What say you, my love?" Lord Hensol asked again. Elisabeth nodded vigorously, smiling from ear to ear. "Yes! Of course, yes!"

The room exploded with cheers and applause. Lord Hensol stood and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. "Oh, my darling, please forgive me. I should have done this weeks ago."

She leaned back and studied his face, still somewhat unable to believe that he had asked her to marry him. "No. I am glad it happened like this, with all our families here."

Mrs Steele walked up, tears streaming down her face. John was beside her, beaming up at Elisabeth. "Well, congratulations to you both. I must say your father would have been very proud."

John nodded and then pulled on Lord Hensol's shirt. "Sir?"

"Yes, John, what is it, my boy?" He leaned down.

"May we eat now, sir? I am simply famished!"

The adults shared a laugh, and Lord Hensol nodded. "Yes, John. Let us all go into the dining room and have our supper!"

The family filed out of the library and into the dining room down the hall, Lord Hensol and Elisabeth hanging back from the group. He took the ring and slipped it onto her finger. He wrapped his arms around

her as they neared the doorway, capturing her for a moment alone. "I love you, Elisabeth," he whispered.

"I love you, too, sir."

Laughing, he cocked his head, just inches from her own. "Had you not better start calling me Charles now?"

Smiling, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Yes, I suppose I shall. Well, then, I love you too ... Charles."

## Chapter 39

"Come along. We cannot keep Lord and Lady Graham waiting!" Charles called over his shoulder. He smiled as Elisabeth rode up next to him and reigned in her mount.

"You must forgive Harriet. She has not been riding in a long time. However, she will soon get used to it, just as I did."

Harriet was struggling, poor girl. She seemed to be terrified of her steed, even though the mare was the most docile in his stable. He did not mind that the journey would be slow, for it was a beautiful late autumn day. He loved this time of year when the air turned crisp and the leaves changed colours. And he also loved that his wedding day was soon approaching.

Word had spread quickly about their engagement, and while Elisabeth's family and friends were overjoyed, some of his London acquaintances had not relished the news. Yet another country earl had chosen one of his employees as a bride, instead of choosing from the well-bred, albeit spoiled, debutantes from 'polite society.' Elisabeth had handled the criticism all in stride. He had spared her from most of the drama, but even so, people's hurtful remarks were bound to get around.

Benjamin and Anna had remained loyal and devoted friends through it all. And although Benjamin had given him the unwelcome advice that they wait for a few months before getting married, he had been right in the long run. Elisabeth had needed the time to adjust from living as a governess to preparing to be his wife.

Some of his friends had come around, although not all. He was grateful for the ones who had and had welcomed them with open arms. Elisabeth had proven to be a charming and diplomatic hostess at the parties they had held for his London friends. She had won them over with her kindness and winning good-humour.

Harriet finally caught up to them, panting. "I apologize, Lord Hensol. I am sure I will get used to this again soon, as Elisabeth says."

Charles rolled his eyes. "Please, Harriet. How many times do I have to tell you to call me Charles? We are soon going to be brother and sister, after all."

"Sorry," she mumbled. "That is another thing I shall have to get used to. Sometimes I still cannot believe my sister is marrying an earl!"

"Well, believe it or not, I am marrying the most wonderful woman in the world in less than a month!" Charles spurred his horse into a gentle trot, and Elisabeth followed.

They soon arrived at the Graham estate. Charles was glad that Anna and Benjamin lived only a few miles away from Hensol. He could imagine that Elisabeth and Anna would be spending a lot of time together in the coming years. Harriet took her time in coming up the drive. Charles and Elisabeth had handed their mounts off to the stable boy to be watered and fed. They visited until Harriet finally made it to the front door. Charles helped her off the horse's back, and she screwed up her face. "Remind me never to do that again."

"We have our return trip, so I am afraid that will not be possible, sister." Charles winked.

"I do not understand how you can go as fast as you do. I would break my neck!" Harriet went to Elisabeth's side and linked an arm through hers. "Why I ever let you talk me into that, I will never know."

"You will be a positive centaur by the time I am done teaching you how to ride." Charles motioned up the steps to the front door, eager to see his friends.

The butler answered the door and showed them to the parlour where tea was already being served. "Welcome, friends!" Benjamin greeted them. "We thought you changed your mind."

"Apologies. We were a little slower than we thought." Charles shook his hand and turned to the ladies.

"It is my fault, Lord Graham." Harriet curtsied and shot a warning glance at Charles.

"Please, call me Benjamin. Or Ben, whichever you prefer." He motioned for them to sit while the maid poured tea for them both. Anna welcomed them, her burgeoning belly starting to show her condition.

"How are you ladies this afternoon?" Anna took a sip of tea and took a bite of her petit four.

"Well, thank you," Elisabeth answered. "You look like you are feeling better."

"Much better, thank you. I suggest you skip the morning sickness part of pregnancy when your time comes." Anna's eyes sparkled with mischief.

"If only that were possible." Elisabeth laughed and glanced over at the gentlemen still talking by the doorway. "However, I am glad that it has passed for you. It seems positively dreadful."

"What is dreadful?" Benjamin asked as the gentlemen came over to the seating area.

"Nothing, dear. Here, I had them pour you a fresh cup."

Benjamin took the cup from Anna and let the matter drop. "I was somewhat surprised to hear that you are not planning a society wedding, Charles. Are there not people you need to impress in the capital?"

"No. We wanted a quiet affair. It will just be you two and Elisabeth's family and some of her friends from the village. And the reverend, of course." They all laughed. Elisabeth smiled up at him. She could not remember a time when she had been happier. Her wedding was just a few short weeks away.

Charles had been incredibly generous to her family. She had opted to stay at the cottage until the wedding. Afterwards, Charles had insisted that her whole family come to live at Hensol. There was a separate wing where they could have privacy if they wished. Her mother would move into Hensol and watch William and Matthew and her siblings

while she and Charles went on a wedding trip.

"Ladies, would you like to follow me to the nursery? I do not think you have seen it since it was finished?" Anna stood gracefully, despite her enlarged belly. "Will you excuse us for a moment gentlemen?"

"Of course. Are you sure you do not want me to help you up the stairs, my love?" Benjamin set down his cup and made to follow them.

"I am not an invalid, Ben." She laughed. "No, you stay down here and discuss horses and cricket, or whatever it is you like to talk about. We will be down shortly."

Elisabeth and Harriet followed Anna up the stairs and down the hall to the nursery. "We had it redecorated. Of course, it has not been used since Ben was a baby. I think it turned out quite charming."

Anna ushered them into the room. It had been redone in the French style. "Ben tried to tell me that a wet nurse would be called in to take care of everything. But I told him absolutely not. I will nurse my children, even though it is not the fashion among elegant ladies." She sat down in a comfortable armchair and placed her hands over her abdomen protectively. "I never could understand why women in the upper classes do that."

Elisabeth walked around the room, marvelling at the cream and gold decorations. She looked out the window into the garden, musing that this would be a peaceful place for Anna and her child to bond. "It is lovely, Anna. I assume you handled picking out the decorations?"



"I did. Although Ben would not allow me to lift a finger." She smiled up at Elisabeth. "I am disappointed that the best governess in England will soon be getting married and will not be able to teach my children as they grow."

Elisabeth laughed. "Well, I know someone else who is also an excellent teacher." She glanced at Harriet. "However, she still has a bit of schooling to finish up."

Harriet joined them. "Oh, I love children. I would be honoured to come and be your governess when the time comes."

"Well, it seems that problem is solved. I look forward to the day. That is, if you are still unmarried."

Harriet screwed up her nose. "Oh, I do not plan on ever getting married."

Elisabeth turned to her in surprise. "Why ever not?"

"I would have to leave Mother and all of you. It seems like a horrible business."

"You may feel differently if the right young man comes along." Anna patted her hand.

Elisabeth bit her lip, longing to ask Anna something for weeks. Now that they had got to know each other more as equals, she felt that she had a place to ask. "Anna? What was it like transitioning from your old life to this?"

Anna thought for a moment. "I have been expecting you to ask this for some time." She took a deep breath and stood. "It was not easy at first. All the fairy tales say that 'love conquers all', but it is far from the truth. It took me a long time to settle into this new role."

Elisabeth nodded but still did not really understand. "Do you mean that love is not always strong enough to keep two people together?"

"What I mean is, love, the kind you read about in storybooks, is not the right kind of love. The feelings and butterflies will fade over time. However, what is left will be far more precious. The type of love you need to weather this life's storms is not a feeling. It is a choice. There will be times when others will criticize you for marrying Charles. They will say you are just after his money and titles. They will say that you are not up to the task of helping run Hensol with him."

Elisabeth lowered her head. She had already thought of those things, even though no one had said them to her face. At least, not yet.

Anna sat down next to her on the small sofa. "You must not listen to them, though. You must choose to love Charles every day, even when you do not feel like it, even when he makes you angry. I know it does not seem possible right now, but there will come a time. Every marriage has these ups and downs." Anna took her hand. "However, I do not doubt that you will rise above the challenges that come your way. You will be a credit to Charles and Hensol."

Elisabeth's eyes misted with tears. "Thank you, Anna. You have no idea how much hearing all this means to me."

She smiled and hugged her. "We common girls must stick together. And I will be here to help you in any way I can. I cannot tell you how long it took me to get the staff on my side after Ben and I were married. I have no doubt you will have an easier time than I did, with Mrs Taylor already in your corner."

That was true. She had a lot to learn about running a household, especially one as big as Hensol. However, knowing that she could ask Anna for advice was a comfort to her.

"Well, shall we rejoin the gentlemen?"

"Yes," Elisabeth answered, motioning for Harriet to join them. When they came back into the parlour, the men were standing at the hearth. Benjamin welcomed them back into the room. "How did you find the nursery?"

"It is beautiful," Elisabeth said as they neared. She stood next to Charles, who grinned down at her. She could tell he was thinking of when they would redecorate the nursery at Hensol. Elisabeth could feel the blush rising in her cheeks. She could not wait to start her life with this wonderful man, who had already made her so happy.

## Epilogue

Elisabeth walked down the aisle in the little country church, the pillars decorated with holly. Her family filled the first two pews on the left, while Matthew, William, Benjamin, and Anna were on the right. They stood as she walked down the aisle on Thomas' arm.

Charles waited for her at the altar, his back still turned to her. Her heart beat wildly as she approached. The day had finally come. She was getting married!

Thomas left her at the altar, and she came to Charles' side. He looked at her, admiration filling his eyes. The reverend began the ceremony, and her eyes filled with tears.

After the introduction, she and Charles repeated the familiar words. "I, Elisabeth, take thee, Charles, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my faith."

They exchanged rings, Charles placing the sapphire ring on her third finger. She put a simple gold band on his and smiled up at him.

"Elisabeth and Charles, having witnessed your vows of love to one another, it is my joy to present you to all gathered here as man and wife. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." The reverend pronounced them, and the church sounded with applause and sounds of congratulations. Elisabeth took Charles' arm, and they walked up the aisle together.

Their family and friends met them outside in the crisp December air. It was Christmas Eve, and a lavish wedding breakfast awaited them all at Hensol. Her mother met her outside and kissed her on the cheek. She then kissed Charles on the cheek. "Welcome to the family, son." He smiled down at her, thanking her for her kindness.

"Shall we go back up to Hensol, Mother Steele?"

"Yes, I will get the children in order. Do not worry about a thing; I have it all in hand." Her mother went to gather the children while Elisabeth and Charles climbed into their carriage. They started up the road towards Hensol. She was so happy that she thought her heart might burst.

Snuggling close to Charles, she rested her head on his shoulder, sighing with contentment.

"How are you Mrs Talbot?" Charles asked, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

"I cannot remember ever being better," she said, looking up into his handsome face.

"Neither can I." He cupped her face, looking deep into her eyes. "I do love you ever so much," he whispered. He lowered his face to hers and covered her mouth with his. Elisabeth closed her eyes and kissed him back. Butterflies swirled in her stomach as he deepened the kiss.

When he ended the kiss, she let out a quiet laugh. "I love you, too," she whispered back.

"Can we not just leave our guests to the wedding breakfast and leave for our wedding trip now?"

Laughing, she leaned away from him for a moment. "No, we cannot. Mother has worked so hard to make this wedding breakfast special. Besides, I am the first of her children to get married. We cannot run out on her."

"I think she would understand," he said, his eyes glistening with mischief.

Laughing again, she snuggled into his chest. "No, we cannot. Even though I am just as eager as you to be away."

The wedding breakfast was a great success. Elisabeth looked around at their family and friends, glad they had not had a big London affair. Everyone she cared about was right here, celebrating with them as they started their new life together.

When the breakfast was well underway, Charles stood and raised his wine glass. The company quieted so Charles could make his toast. "I want to thank you all for coming today. You have made this day all the more special with your presence. I want to give a toast to my new wife, Elisabeth." He turned to her and met her gaze.

"When you came into our lives a few short months ago, I had no idea

how much your presence would enrich my life. You brought life back to Hensol. Your happiness will be my primary concern from this day forward. I love you, Elisabeth." He leaned down and kissed her on the lips, eliciting applause from their family and friends. She blushed as he continued, "To Mrs Talbot!"

Everyone echoed the sentiment. Charles remained standing and extended his hand for Elisabeth to take. "And now, please enjoy the feast. Stay as long as you like, but I believe my wife and I should be getting on down the road before it gets dark."

He led Elisabeth to the foyer, and the guests all followed them to see them off. Elisabeth kissed her mother and siblings on the cheek, telling them to be good and help her mother look after Hensol while they were gone. Elisabeth then said goodbye to William and Matthew, hugging them close.

"Welcome to the family, Sister Elisabeth," William whispered in her ear. She smiled down at him and chucked him under the chin.

"Thank you, Will."

"Hurry home, Sister Elisabeth," Matthew said, hugging her around the middle.

"We will." She laughed, glancing up at Charles. He raised his brows but said nothing. They had no intention of hurrying back, but it would do no good to say so to Matthew.

She put her wrap around her shoulders, and Charles took her arm,

leading her out to the carriage. They climbed in and waved as they rolled down the gravel drive.

When they were no longer in sight, she turned into Charles, wrapping her arms around his neck. She kissed him soundly and then leaned back, her eyes dancing with fun. "Now, where are you taking me, Lord Hensol?"

"Well, I thought we might go to South America, Lady Talbot. What say you to that?" he teased.

"I say, as long as I am with you, I would follow you to the ends of the earth."

He nodded and smiled down at her. "My sentiments exactly."

## ***THE END***

*Can't get enough of Elisabeth and Charles? Then make sure to check out  
the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*In what incredibly thoughtful way will Charles help out Elisabeth's family  
after the wedding?*

*What special surprises will Charles and Elisabeth have in store for each  
other on their first anniversary?*



*What emotional revelation on Christmas Day will move Elisabeth's mother  
to tears?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://arianorton.com/elisabeth>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first  
chapters from “**Loving a Forsaken Earl**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*

The book cover features a woman with dark, wavy hair sitting on a light-colored, tufted sofa. She is wearing a voluminous, off-the-shoulder yellow gown with lace detailing on the bodice and a wide matching belt. Behind her is a large, multi-paned window with light-colored curtains, through which green foliage is visible. The author's name, 'ARIA NORTON', is written in a dark blue, elegant serif font at the top. The title, 'LOVING A FORSAKEN EARL', is written in the same font across the lower half of the image, overlaid on the woman's dress.

ARIA NORTON

LOVING A  
FORSAKEN  
EARL

# Loving a Forsaken Earl

## Introduction

Miss Abigail Staton leaves a quiet country life behind and travels to London to live with her brother after their father's tragic death. As an inexperienced politician, her brother has struggled in running for a seat in the Commons. Abigail, however, is exceptionally astute and has a particular knack for politics. When a stranger shows up on their doorstep asking for assistance with an unusual scheme of revenge, Abigail's life is turned upside down. Despite her misgivings, she is unable to resist the opportunity to work with this handsome stranger and possibly save her brother's career and livelihood. With powerful feelings overwhelming her, will she manage to navigate this precarious situation without ending up with a broken heart?

With a wedding to his childhood sweetheart just a few weeks away, Lord Thomas Brampton feels he has found love and is on his way to having the family he has always dreamed of. When his fiancée suddenly leaves him for another man, Thomas' world falls apart and he decides to make this man pay. Setting out to accomplish his plan, he finds himself working alongside a hopeful politician and a captivating young woman who surprises him every step of the way. Will Thomas choose to stay focused on his goal or will his heart unwittingly open up to entirely new, wonderful possibilities?

As Abigail and Thomas are thrown together by fate, she starts to see

what a caring and kind man he really is, and he can't help but be drawn to this extraordinary young woman. Feeling they are in an impossible situation, neither of them dares to hope for a chance at something unimaginable... With all their plans gradually taking shape, will this risky plot succeed, or will it turn out to be the ruin of them all? Will Thomas and Abigail ever allow themselves to see each other in a new light and go after what their hearts truly want?

## Prologue

Abigail Staton stood beside her weeping mother as her father's coffin was lowered into the grave. She sniffed back tears, lifting her chin to try and maintain a brave front. Her brother, Joshua, stood on their mother's right, holding her elbow should she faint.

Abigail glanced over at him, seeing his face set in a somber frown. Joshua and her father had never been particularly close. His demands over her brother's life had been too constricting to allow any warm feelings to blossom between them.

It had been the same for her and her father. As a doctor who treated the county's high-class citizens, Doctor Elias Staton had rarely been home. Even when he was, Abigail and Joshua found that they could never live up to their father's exacting expectations.

He had always pushed Joshua to better himself, and the family's standing, by distinguishing himself in the political arena. For Abigail, he had had plans of a triumphant marriage to an earl, or maybe even a viscount.

Abigail turned away from the grave, steering her mother down the stone path leading back to the church. Joshua followed a few paces behind, his head hung low. Neither of them had accomplished their father's visions for their lives before he passed away. The memory of his last words to her haunted her dreams and dogged her every waking hour.

*"You should have married when you had the chance. And now you and your mother will live in squalor for the rest of your days..."*

The disappointment in his eyes was worse than his cruel words. Fear for an uncertain future, combined with her mother's grief, had made the last few weeks of her father's life nearly unbearable. If not for Joshua, she would have distended into madness by now.

"Don't worry about us, Father." She had tried to comfort him during his last hours, "Joshua will look after us."

He had given a derisive laugh. "I can't trust that boy to put one foot in front of the other, let alone make a name for himself in politics. No. It will be up to you, Abigail. You must marry well and save the family from ruin. Promise me..."

She had promised to help put his mind at ease as he drifted from their world and into the next. However, she doubted a man of means would be tempted to take her as a bride: untitled, a modest dowry, the sister of a lowly politician.

"Come, Mother. We should get out of this weather. I believe it is going to rain." Abigail turned her towards the coach, and Joshua helped her in. Their mother seemed hardly able to walk on her own, drifting through the days like an apparition. Despite all their father's shortcomings and coldness towards his children, their parents had loved each other.

Climbing in and sitting down alongside her mother, she grasped her mother's icy hand. Her mother glanced over at her after several seconds, as if seeing her for the first time that day. "Your father loved you," she whispered, barely audibly. Abigail met her brother's gaze, who wore the same pained expression. Why could her father have not said it when he was alive? Why had he been so cold towards them, if

what her mother said was true?

"I know, Mama." Abigail gave her a weak smile. Now was not the time to voice her questions, not with her mother so frail. Why did people always wait until it was too late to tell those closest to them how much they loved them?

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The next few days were a whirlwind for Abigail. She oversaw preparations for their moderately large home to be rented out. With the stipend her father had set aside for her mother, the larger house was no longer within her means.

"We shall be perfectly comfortable living with my sister at her seaside cottage," her mother had explained. Her nose and eyes were still red from the constant onslaught of tears.

Abigail had rebelled against the idea, though. A quiet country life was not to her liking.

"You may come and stay with me, sister, if ever you have need of some excitement." Joshua had raised an eyebrow at the idea of her living in the country. He knew her temperament, knew that she would go mad twiddling her thumbs while their aunt prattled on endlessly about her 'dear, departed Francis'. Their uncle had died nearly fifteen years before. Their aunt had yet to stop talking about the funeral or relay what 'dear, departed Francis' would have said. Oh, no. A country cottage was the last place she wanted to be.



"You would not mind me going to live with Joshua, would you, Mother? I could help him run his home and play hostess for his parties." Her brother was as yet still unmarried. At three and twenty, he had plenty of time to find a bride. However, Abigail did not. At one and twenty, her father had made her out to be an old maid, a veritable spinster in the making.

Her mother had looked up at her surprise. "I would not mind at all, my dear. Joshua could benefit from a woman's touch around his house." It had become immediately apparent in their few visits to his London home that he was not the best at hiring servants or ordering meals. "He will need to make a good impression on his guests if he is to gain any clout as a politician."

Abigail let out a sigh of relief at the memory. Thankfully, her mother and aunt got along well. Her mother listened to her aunt's endless reveries about Francis without complaint. And her aunt coddled her mother in her 'nervous complaints' and random crying spells.

It would be a pity to see the old house go to renters. She had grown up in this house and had shared some wonderful childhood memories with Joshua. They had practically raised themselves since the luxury of a governess had not been something their parents could afford.

She now walked the halls, ensuring that every room was cleaned to perfection and the essential family heirlooms were packed away. All her father's paintings and books would stay with the house. Sighing, she sat down heavily in one of the chairs in the library, relishing the smell of the musty books and the memories of the many happy hours she and Joshua had spent there. She stood and went to a poorly lit shelf near the back of the small library, dug behind a few large volumes, and brought out her secreted copy of 'The Rights of Man' by Thomas Paine. Had her father known she had been reading such a book, he would have burned it immediately and forbade her from ever reading such 'rubbish' again.

She clutched the book to her chest. Her father had tried for years to make a politician out of his son. However, it was his daughter who had been given the passion for government and its many intricacies. "You should be the one running for office," her brother had stated on several occasions.

Abigail exited the library, holding the precious volume at her side. If only women were allowed to compete in the political arena.

A few days later, the house had been closed up and readied for the tenants that would arrive the following Saturday. Abigail took one last look at the home before climbing into the public coach. Her mother wept as they pulled away, their trunks weighing down the carriage.

They traveled nearly non-stop until they reached their aunt's cottage near the Devonshire coast. The cliffs were breathtaking, and for a moment, Abigail felt at peace. Exhausted from having to oversee all the preparations for leaving the house, she fell into fitful snatches of sleep throughout the journey.

"Oh, my dears! How good to see you all have arrived in one piece! My nerves have not given me a moment's peace since learning of your departure. As my dear, departed Francis used to say, one should avoid travel in the winter at all costs! I was afraid for your lives every minute!"

Abigail's aunt met them at the coach's door and did not stop to take a breath until they had all reached the door of her cottage.

"It is so good of you to allow Mother to stay with you, Aunt Beatrice," Abigail interjected during a slight pause.

"Oh, my dear, think nothing of it. It will be good to have someone to pass the time of day with. Since dear Francis passed, I have been wanting the companionship of another fellow human being. My sister will be quite comfortable here, I am sure. Just like the old days when we were girls, won't it Caroline? Now, do come in before we all catch our deaths of cold..."

Aunt Beatrice continued talking, rattling on about the improvements she had made to the cottage over the years. Joshua allayed Abigail at the door and rolled his eyes. "Are you sure we need to stay? Aunt Beatrice will make sure Mother settles in." It was no secret that Joshua did not care for their aunt.

"Joshua, we cannot leave her now. We have promised to stay for a few days to see that she is settled. Besides, I am weary from the journey. And so are you. A few days at the coast will help bolster us before we continue on to London."

"Very well," Joshua said tersely and followed her into the cottage.

In time Joshua saw that she was right in breaking their journey to London. They spent most of their time walking along the cliffs just a mile from their aunt's cottage or ambling along the seashore.

"Write to me often, my dears," their mother requested as they said their goodbyes. Three days was more than Joshua could take, and Abigail was eager to be on her way as well.

"We will, Mother," Abigail promised for both of them. She gave her brother a sideways glance, and he stepped forward to give his mother a kiss on the cheek.

"Goodbye Mother. Do let me know if you are in need of anything from London." She hugged him awkwardly and nodded.

"Thank you, my boy." Her mother turned when their aunt came out onto the front stoop.

"Really, Caroline, I cannot believe you are allowing your only daughter to go running off to London. It is improper for an unmarried woman."

"She is going under my care and protection, Aunt. It could not be more proper for her to do so." Joshua turned as the public coach was seen coming down the road. He waved down the coachman, who slowed the carriage and came to a stop in front of the house.

"Goodbye, Mother." Abigail hugged her mother one last time as the trunks were loaded onto the top of the coach. Joshua waited by the open door to help her in. She hugged her aunt, who kissed her on the cheek despite her disapproval.

"Take care, my girl," Aunt Beatrice whispered. "As my dear, poor Francis used to say, where one door closes, God opens another."

Nodding, she took a step back and took both of their hands. "We'll make you proud, Mother. I promise."

She then turned and walked to the coach, tears threatening to stain

her cheeks. Perhaps her aunt was right. Maybe this would be a whole new start for her. She imagined what it would be like to find a husband, to start a family of her own. She would not be cold and unfeeling towards her children, as her father had been towards her. All her life she had strived for his approval, to know that he loved her. How differently she would do things with a family of her own.

Waving as the coach lurched forward and started down the road, Abigail wondered if she would ever be happy again.

# Chapter 1

*One year later*

Lord Thomas Brampton, Earl of Harborough, entered one of the private meeting rooms in the gaming house, finding a haze of pipe smoke hanging in the air. This is not how he had envisioned his day going. As one of the members in the House of Lords, he had been called into the hastily gathered meeting by his superiors.

Prime Minister Spencer Perceval had been shot a few hours earlier as he entered the House of Commons. Thomas' political party heads had called an emergency meeting to discuss what was to be done. However, since the authorities had already taken the perpetrator into custody, Thomas did not see what else could be done. A merchant by trade, John Bellingham, had not tried to escape after shooting Perceval in the chest.

"He says he acted alone. I do not think we need fear that a conspiracy is afoot. Perceval was not popular with the poor classes, with his unlimited spending to win the war against Napoleon. Even so, Bellingham swears that he acted alone, bringing retribution to the government." Lord Elinger puffed on his pipe nonchalantly, as if they were discussing the horse races' latest outcome rather than a man who had been murdered in the front hall of the House of Commons.

"I agree. John Bellingham is a man redressing a grievance, or at least what he believes is a grievance. He says he was wrongly imprisoned in Russia and that the British government should compensate him. I hardly think him intelligent enough to lead a rebellion, though," another of the older gentlemen chimed in.

Thomas shook his head. He was sure that Bellingham had acted alone, but it would be foolhardy not to investigate further. There was talk of an inquest being held the following morning, at the Cat and Bagpipes Public House.

If his inclinations were correct, the man responsible for the Prime Minister's death would soon hang. Better to be sure that he had acted of his own volition, without aid, than to risk more unrest by not catching others involved. Still, it was not his decision to make.

Thomas said nothing, preferring to listen to the arguments than give forth his own input. The liquor flowed freely, and a card game soon started. Although he did not indulge in strong drink as heavily as some of the other patrons, Thomas joined in the gaiety. Sitting down with a few of his friends and colleagues, they started a game of poker. All was going well until a man Thomas detested decided to interrupt and insert himself into the game.

"Good evening, old chap," Harold Withesby greeted Thomas. Thomas gave a cursory nod and went back to studying his cards. "You don't mind if I join, do you?"

Thomas did mind but said nothing.

"Of course not; please sit down," one of the other gentlemen replied, scooting his chair over slightly so that Harold could participate.

Harold wore a strange expression as if he knew something that Thomas did not. Trying to ignore the hateful man, he turned to his good friend, Frederic Bauer.

"How are the improvements coming on your new abode, Fred?"

"They are coming along quite nicely, now that we have had a break in the weather. I only hope it will hold..."

"Have you heard the latest about this new chap, what's his name? Sir Ezra Filmore?" Harold asked loudly, interrupting Thomas and Fredric's conversation. Thomas did his best not to roll his eyes and huff. Harold was a shameless gossip, his tongue lacerating his enemies and leaving them in humiliating heaps for all to see.

Moving in circles with the nobility and the commoner, Harold had a way of charming secrets out of people. His stories gained more venom at each retelling until the information hardly resembled the original facts. This did not matter when it came to the London gossip mill, though. Harold seemed to gather a sick enjoyment from other people's misery and downfall.

As for the gentleman in question, Thomas had not heard much about him. Although he had met him once at the gaming club, they had not spoken in depth. Sir Ezra Filmore was new to the capital. Like so many of the men sitting around the table, he was trying to distinguish himself through a political career. And it seemed that he was winning over the people very quickly.

"No, what is it you've heard, Harold?" Charles Chancellor asked. He was a funny little man whose face was contorted into a constant squint even though he wore glasses. It gave him the look of a weasel. In reality, he was a man who held no opinions of his own, merely going along with whatever anyone else was saying so as not to rock the boat. Charles and Harold were inseparable, with Harold acting as a host and Charles a parasite in the relationship.



Thomas did not like either of the gentlemen. Harold was a vain, greedy little man, with pudgy skin that flowed over his trousers like a cake overflowing its tin as it baked. Charles was his complete opposite, standing tall and thin like a beanpole, blown about by every changing opinion. Herald smiled at Thomas wickedly and continued.

"I saw a certain lady coming out of Sir Ezra Filmore's home the other day. She was quite flustered when I made myself known. Quite a guilty look about her, if you ask me." Herald placed his cards on the table, revealing a straight flush. "Hah! I think I've taken that hand, chaps!"

Thomas laid his cards on the table, having collected nothing of worth throughout the game.

His heart beat wildly in his chest. Why was Harold pointing the gossip towards him? A terrible suspicion dogged his mind. Could the lady have been his fiancé, Lady Sarah Thorne? Sarah had danced with Sir Filmore at the opening ball of the season a month prior. But he did not know of any further correspondence between them.

"Who was the woman?" one of the other gentlemen asked testily. Harold had a way of drawing out news for effect, so much so that Thomas was sure it would make a nun swear.

He met Thomas' gaze and smiled. "It was Lady Sarah Thorne. I'm sure she was making a regular house call on the gentleman's mother or sister. But of course, that would not account for her nervousness, would it?"

"Ezra Filmore has no family," Frederic replied through clenched teeth. He, too, had not taken a liking to Harold.

"I did not know that." Harold feigned innocence to the fact that Ezra lived alone. Thomas saw right through his game. He was a terrible liar, although he guessed he was making no real effort to conceal his

knowledge. He was enjoying this, all the while twisting the knife into Thomas' heart.

"You're a liar and a cad, Harold Withesby." Thomas stood, shaking slightly. He would not allow his anger to come to blows with the odious man, which was precisely what Harold wanted. Banning him from the club was his main goal, no doubt.

"What reason would I have to lie about this? I would think that if I was marrying a young lady and she had been unfaithful even before the wedding night, I would want my friends to tell me."

Thomas's face went pale. "Excuse me." Turning his back on the gentlemen at the table, he started to walk away.

"I feel for you, Lord Brampton. And with your wedding only a few weeks away." He *tsked* and sighed. Harold's lips dripped with honey, but his words came with a poisonous bite. "I am sorry if I have spoken out of turn, Lord Brampton."

Thomas turned, his furry all too apparent. However, before he could say something that he would regret, Frederic stood and grabbed his arm. "Good evening, gentlemen. Harold," Frederic spat. Harold lifted his chin with the pointed insult and huffed as Frederic led Thomas out of the meeting room table.

"Don't believe a word he says, Tom. I'm sure he was just trying to goad you."

"No. He knows something. He would never say that unless he had actually seen Sarah with Sir Filmore."

Frederic pulled him into one of the vacant gaming rooms. The shadows cast odd shapes on their faces as they talked in hushed tones. His emotions were swirling, making him feel like he was stuck in a whirlpool. Which way was up? He couldn't catch his breath.

"He never said he saw her with the man. He said he saw her coming out of his house..." Frederic tried to reason the situation out, thinking that there had to be a logical explanation for her behavior.

"Yes! And what am I to make of that?" Thomas exploded, raking his hands through his dark blonde hair. Pacing in front of the fireplace, he tried to get his emotions under control.

Frederic drew back slightly. "I apologise, my friend. I am not trying to make light of the situation. But when have you ever trusted a word that Harold Withesby said?" Frederic came to stand by his side, his face filled with compassion.

Thomas shook his head and met his gaze. "I have never trusted anything he says. But I have to be sure." Staring into the flames for a moment, he let out a breath. A part of him wanted to rush to her house and see if it were true. Another part wanted to stall as long as possible, just in case it was. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Frederic gave a weak smile. "Don't worry about it, old friend. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thank you. I don't think there's anything either of us can do. Not until I know the truth."

"Well, I'm here if you find you do need anything. Hopefully Harold is just running his mouth as usual, making a mountain out of a molehill."

Thomas tried to smile and put his friend at ease, wishing that his unease was not so apparent. He trusted Sarah, although she was a bit naive to the ways of the world.

"Come on, let's call for some drinks and we'll talk it over." Frederic stuck his head out of the room and summoned one of the waiters. "Scotch and two glasses please."

Thomas was retreating within himself. He had built up so many hopes for his future with Sarah. What if it was all crumbling around him?

When the drinks came, they sat down in the chairs before the hearth. Thomas was aware that Frederic was studying him closely. Usually a laid back, pleasant fellow, it was not like Thomas to be sullen and introspective when in company.

"Is there any foundation in Harold's rumors?" Frederic asked, trying to draw Thomas out of his dour contemplation.

Thomas swirled his glass in a circular motion, watching the amber liquid slosh gently around the bottom. "They have met. He asked her to dance at the opening ball of the season. It's possible that she has been seeing him behind my back, I suppose. I've been so busy with meetings at the House."

"Sarah doesn't strike me as someone who would do that, though."

Thomas would never have thought her capable of betraying him until Harold had placed the seed of doubt in his mind. Sarah was the most beautiful lady in London. However, she was very impressionable as well, prone to trusting anyone who petted her vanity.

"I don't know. I just don't know anymore..." Thomas tipped his head and drained the rest of his drink. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll walk home with you," Frederic offered, placing both their empty glasses on the side table for the waiter to collect later.

"No. Thank you, Fred, but no. I want to be alone for a while."

He walked out of the gaming club, angry with himself for allowing Harold to get a rise out of him. A ball of fear settled in the pit of his stomach. He had to be sure that Sarah was alright and that there was no foundation for Withesby's lies.

## Chapter 2

Abigail stared out of the window at the busy street below her bedroom window. Sighing, she allowed her maid to tighten her stays and then climbed into her dress to go down to dinner. Her gowns were not lavish by any means, but they were pretty nonetheless. She smoothed the satin fabric of her skirts down and turned in the full-length mirror once more.

Knowing she was not a classic beauty, she sighed with disappointment at her reflection. Her hair hung in dark, semi-straight stands down her back, tied back with a simple ribbon. They could not afford expensive silver combs or other such luxuries. Her jaw was square and strong, like her father's. Her brown eyes were nothing special, in her opinion. Her one crowning beauty was her full lips and unblemished complexion.

The bloom of youth was still apparent on her cheeks, enhanced by her high cheekbones. Her father had always called her plain. Joshua had encouraged her that there was more to life than being beautiful, remaining true to men's insensitive and unwitting ways of putting their feet in their mouths.

Although she was pretty, she would never have classified herself as beautiful. Even so, her brother's attempts to help encourage her had stung. No young lady wanted to be told she only had her intelligence to recommend her. Her mother had often told her in her letters that she was getting old and needed to hurry and find a husband if she was to have any hope of security. It did not help that her dowry was small. She would be lucky if a young farmer took pity on her and asked for her hand.

Oh no. She would rather die an old maid than live in the country. A

woman of refined taste and aspirations, she longed for a life of adventure in the political arena. It was too bad that she had been born a woman, she thought, and not for the first time. Why was it that boys were allowed to go off to war, vote, own land, and a plethora of other things that women were not allowed to do? The injustice of it all turned her stomach.

Several times during the year following her father's death, her mother had pleaded for her to come and live with her at the cottage. She was a mild hypochondriac and railed on and on about the unhealthy conditions of London. The air was terrible, the smells were enough to drive one to delirium, and the food was too rich. Abigail tried to allay her mother's fears as best she could, glad that she was many miles away from her mother's nagging voice and her aunt's woes. Thankfully, her aunt indulged her mother's every whim, and her mother listened to her aunt's endless prattle. They were the perfect pair.

Her mother's last letter had been particularly hurtful, although it had been unconsciously so. *I beg that you would put forth an effort, my dear, and settle down. Tending to one's family is the greatest joy a woman can find. I would remind you of the promise you made to your father to marry well and save the family. It is up to you now, as I doubt Joshua's political career will amount to anything...*

Abigail had not shown the letter to Joshua. He was already insecure about his campaign to be elected to a place in the House of Commons. He did not need the added pressure of his mother's lack of faith in him.

It was in her brother's weaknesses that she had found her place to thrive. She had identified her calling; to help her brother with his campaign and see him elected to the House of Commons. He had not the political bent for the post for which he was running. Joshua was too docile, too bent on pleasing everyone, and frightened out of his mind that he would offend people. As a politician, he would need to

grow thicker skin and trade in his soft-spoken nature for a more commanding presence and speech.

Abigail liked to think she had helped him to that end over the last year. Although he had not been elected the previous year, she hoped that this year's campaign would change that. His biggest problem was staying in tune with the people he hoped to represent.

She was jolted out of her reverie when she heard a hackney carriage pull up in front of the house. Glancing out of the window once more, she saw her brother climbing down from the small carriage. He held an umbrella over his head as he made a dash for the front door. The rain had begun in earnest as the sun descended behind the westward buildings on the opposite side of the street.

Abigail went downstairs to meet her brother. Handing the umbrella to the maid, he shook the water off his light jacket. The maid, Mazzie, placed the umbrella in the stand near the door to dry and waited for Joshua to hand his coat to her. Joshua huffed, handing over the coat with a frown.

"Abominable weather!" he panted, and slammed the door before Mazzie could do so. She stepped back in surprise and lowered her head.

Abigail recognised her brother's foul temper and met him at the door with a smile. She linked her arm through his and led him away before he could take out his frustration on Mazzie. "It is not a cold rain is it? It is mid-May after all." Abigail looked over his brother's shoulder to Mazzie. "A towel for Master Staton, please, Mazzie."

Mazzie disappeared down the hall and came back with a towel for



Joshua to dry his face and hair. "No it is not too cold, but being drenched on the way into the house has put me in an even worse temper than I was before."

"Are you in a temper, brother? Whatever for?" Abigail led him into the parlor where a cheery fire was blazing, and had him sit down to warm himself. "Mazzie, please bring tea and refreshments for us," she instructed the maid, who hurried off to do as she was bid.

"It was a terrible day at the House. No doubt you've heard of the Prime Minister's assassination? And never mind, Mazzie! Bring the bottle of Scotch and a glass."

Mazzie glanced at her mistress as if to confirm that this was alright. Abigail nodded, and the girl went to the study to retrieve what her brother had requested. She placed a hand on his arm and tried to calm him. The last thing he needed was to drink himself into oblivion. He had a debate the next day. "Tell me what happened."

Joshua stood and edged closer to the hearth, holding his hands palm out to soak up the warmth. "It's that darned Sir Filmore. He has a way with the people that I will never have."

"Don't say that. From what I hear, Filmore is a cad and drunkard. You are twice the man he is."

"That may be so, but he charms his voters with fancy speeches and gifts. He's bested me for the third time in a debate. And I'm sure he'll take the next one tomorrow."

Mazzie appeared with the Scotch and set the bottle and glass down on the side table for him. She quickly left the room, feeling the tension bristling in the air. Joshua was not unkind by nature, but the last few months had put such a strain on him. He was becoming more sullen as of late, lashing out at the servants and even at her at times. Abigail gave Mazzie an apologetic glance before she disappeared from the parlor.

"You will just have to learn his weaknesses, brother."

"You don't understand, Abby. If I don't win this election, we are ruined! I've spent most of Father's inheritance on the last two campaigns, and what have I got to show for it? Nothing! We'll both be living with Mother and Aunt Beatrice by year's end if I can't turn this around." Joshua sat down and poured himself a drink, taking a long swig before he continued.

"I don't think I have what it takes to be a success in the political arena. I'm not like you."

Abigail knelt before her brother and took the drink from his hands. His depressive moods only became worse when he drank. She set the glass on the side table and took both his hands in hers. "Joshua. I believe in you. And you know I am here to help you in whatever way I can. We will figure it out together, I promise." He smiled down at her and gave her hands a light squeeze.

"I have always known I can count on you. I'm sorry for my temper. I know it must be beastly for you, with all the stress of running the household and trying to help me keep my career afloat."

"I would not want to be anywhere else. You know that. Through thick and thin, I am with you, brother."

He sighed as she let go of his hands and sat down in her chair again. They stared into the flames crackling away in the fireplace for a moment, a companionable pause stretching between them. The rain started coming down even harder, pounding on the rooftop. It was one of her favorite sounds in the world.

"I should never have listened to Father, no matter how he railed at me. I'm not cut out for this life," Joshua whispered. Abigail's heart broke for him. He had always dreamed of going into the church, a profession for which he would have been much better suited. He was much more concerned with people's spiritual needs than gaining their favor so they would vote for him.

Politics drained him of his energy, rather than exciting him as it did for Abigail. They had both disappointed their father, their personalities not matching his expectations. Joshua was the quiet, docile one, where she was passionate and headstrong. It was too bad they could not switch places.

"Everything will be fine. You'll see. We will transform you into a first-rate politician if it's the last thing I do!"

He laughed. "My sister. Ever the optimist." Shaking his head, he stood. "I should change for dinner. Thank you, Abby, for trying to cheer me up. I don't know what I would do without you."

She nodded as he left the room. She called for Mazzie and had her take the unfinished glass of Scotch to the kitchen. Abigail took the liquor bottle back to the study and replaced it on the drink cart. If only she could run for office in her brother's place, then all would be well. Knowing that the stress of losing the house and their livelihood weighed heavily on her brother's shoulders, she had taken to making small economies here and there.

Their financial status was not looking good, although she tried to keep this fact from her brother as much as possible. He did not need even more bad news to worry him. With the election looming only six months away, the prime minister's assassination, and the upheaval of the war with Napoleon, Joshua was in for a bumpy ride.

Abigail went back out into the parlor to tidy it up before dinner. Joshua soon rejoined her, and they talked about his day at the office. "You've heard about the Prime Minister, no doubt?"

"Yes, how awful! His poor family, they must be devastated." Abigail's heart went out to Mrs. Perceval and their twelve children. She could not imagine raising twelve children on her own.

"Everyone is reeling. The government wants a swift trial and an end to it all. With the war still on, we need to set in the new Prime Minister as soon as possible."

"Perhaps you can run for the post. That would solve all of our financial difficulties," Abigail teased.

Joshua laughed. "Only in our dreams would I become Prime Minister, sister."

## Chapter 3

Instead of going straight home, Thomas made his way to his fiancé's house as the sun was setting, a light spring shower greeting him as he exited the gaming house. The rain picked up, however, as he made his way down the street. Wishing he had hailed a hackney, he pulled up his coat collar and wrapped his arms around his waist to ward off the chill.

His only worry was for Sarah's safety, though. He had to be sure that Harold's words were unfounded. It was true that Sarah was the most beautiful woman in London, and would therefore be hard to mistake for someone else. However, Harold would have had the gall to play a nasty trick on him as well. The only other alternative was that what Harold claimed was genuine. Thomas could hardly bear to think about that now.

When he arrived at the Thorne mansion, his clothes were soaked through. He must have looked like a drowned rat, with his hair slickly pasted to his brow. It took a moment for the butler to recognise him.

"Good evening, Smithers. It's me, Lord Brampton."

"Oh, good heavens! Please come in, sir!" Smithers exclaimed. He went to tell the Lord and Lady of the house that he was there, leaving him to stand dripping on the foyer's expensive rug.

Thomas sniffed and stood as still as possible so as not to soak down anything else. Lord Thorne came out of his study a moment later, looking distraught.

"I am sorry for calling so late, sir, and for dripping all over your carpets..."

"Nonsense, my boy. Come in and warm yourself." Lord Thorne seemed to be distracted, not even noticing that Thomas was standing in a small puddle in his foyer.

"No, thank you. I would not leave a water stain on Lady Thorne's good chairs. I wanted to come and speak with Lady Sarah, if it is agreeable."

He looked around for Sarah, hoping that she would appear at the sound of his voice.

Lord Thorne shook his head. "I think you had better come in. We've just received the most dreadful news."

Thomas' heart sank, fearing that Withesby's cruel words were valid after all. "What has happened, sir? I cannot bear to be kept in the dark another minute."

Sarah's father sighed heavily. "You have heard then. I'm afraid it's all too true. Sarah has run away with Sir Filmore."

The words fell like a judge's gavel. The hall started spinning, reeling as he tried to take it all in. "No..." he whispered, halting in his tracks. "It can't be true. Sarah would never do this to me, to her family." It was all too much.

"I'm afraid it is, son." Lord Thorne put his hand on Thomas' shoulder in a familial gesture. He led him into the study where Sarah's mother was sitting before the desk, weeping. She stood when she heard Thomas and her husband enter the room. When she realised Thomas had come, she went to him and took his hands.

"Oh, Lord Brampton!" She squeezed his hands, and he looked down at her glumly. "Have you heard the news?"

"I have, Madam. I am shocked, to say the least," Thomas replied, wishing that he could leave and never look back. He felt as if his chest was laid bare, his heart vulnerable for the whole world to see. How could Sarah do this to him?

"As we all are! I assure you, this is not the way I have raised my daughter. I shall never speak to her again!" Lady Thorne went back to her seat and sank into the chair, holding a handkerchief to her nose. "She has treated all of us abominably ill. Most of all you!"

Thomas could not argue with her on that point. Sarah had broken faith with him in the worst way possible - by running away with another man. Even so, he was angrier with Sir Filmore than Sarah. She was an impressionable young woman, and not the best judge of character. No doubt Filmore had used that to his advantage as he had tempted her away from him and her family's protection.

Thomas must focus on something else other than his roiling emotions, though. Perhaps there was still time to save her from her disastrous decision. "Where is she now?"

Her mother let out a sob. "We don't know."

"She left this letter, with no clue as to where they were going. I've been to Filmore's home and his servants have no idea where they have gone either. I don't know if they are protecting him or if he simply didn't tell them. Here," he held out a letter. "She wrote us this letter and left it on her mantel in her room. She was gone before her maid went up this morning."

Thomas took the offered missive and scanned its contents. She had been vague about where they were going, merely stating that they were leaving the city to elope. Sarah was nineteen and would have still needed her father's permission to marry if they had done so in the conventional way. The fact that she had betrayed Thomas on top of it was unforgivable.

"Find her for me." Lady Thorne took his hand and made him walk around her chair so that he was facing her.

"I don't know what I can do, Lady Thorne. She is out of my reach now."

"Please, Thomas. You know her. She is not the mastermind of this plan. You are in Sir Filmore's circle, are you not? He will have to come back to London at some point, with his political career on the line."

"I thought you said you would never speak to her again? What good would it do to find her now? She has made her choice."

"She is my only child, Lord Brampton," she said softly. "Although I



cannot welcome her into my home, I want to know if she is well. I must know that she is safe."

Thomas nodded, wanting the same. He had been in love with Sarah since she was fifteen, waiting years until she was of marriageable age. Now Filmore had taken the only woman he had ever loved from him. He owed it to the Thornes to find out whatever he could about Sarah's whereabouts.

"I will do what I can, Lord and Lady Thorne. I make no promises, but I will try." His mind reeling, he had no idea where to start to try and track the wayward couple down. He supposed he could go to Filmore's house and try to pry information out of his staff.

"That is all we ask, Lord Brampton. Thank you." Lady Thorne looked as if she had aged ten years in the space of a day. What she was going through, he could not even fathom. To be a parent of a child who had vanished, even to a grown woman, must be terrifying.

Lord Thorne saw him out. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, my boy." He placed a hand on his shoulder and sighed. "I was looking forward to having you as my son-in-law."

Thomas shook his head. "I was looking forward to it as well. Goodbye, sir. I'll let you know if I can find anything."

"Thank you."

Thomas hurried home, hailing a cab this time. He was grumpy from everything that had transpired and from being soaked to the bone.

"This letter came for you, My Lord," the butler said as Thomas walked through the door. The butler held out the silver tray on which the letter was resting and helped Thomas off with his coat. He took the note and went straight up to his room to change out of his sodden clothes.

The letter was in Sarah's hand, and it smelled of her perfume. Intrigued, he opened the message, wondering if she would give him any further explanation than she had given her parents. He sat down on the lounge chair near the hearth and began to read.

*My dearest Thomas,*

*It is with a heavy heart that I write this news to you...*

Thomas snorted derisively. He doubted her heart was heavy in the slightest.

*I have long wanted to tell you of my true feelings towards you. Do not think that I am ungrateful for the many years of devotion you have bestowed upon me. You have always been kind and generous, and for that I commend you. However, over the last month, I have realised what it means to fall head over heels for someone. Please forgive me for what I am about to do. I must break the promise I gave to you. You will think me impulsive and foolish, perhaps, but I must go where my heart is leading me.*

*Sir Ezra Filmore and I are going to be married. He has asked me to go away with him to elope. I am deeply sorry for any pain this news may cause you. Ours was a match of convenience, where my match with Filmore is that of the heart.*

Thomas paused at this, blindsided. He has always thought she returned his feelings for her. Had she been pretending the whole time to please her parents? Had he been deceived by her smiles and blushes for the last four years? What a fool he had been! He continued reading, the rage building inside him.

*The last favor I would ask is that you keep what I am about to write a secret. Filmore and I have eloped to Brighton. Please do not tell Mama and Papa. I know that Papa will not understand why I have gone against his wishes to marry Filmore. I daresay no one will understand. We will be back in London soon. I will explain everything to my parents then.*

*Finally, I must say again that I am sorry for the haste in which I write this letter. I wanted you to know the truth from my own words and not those of my father. Goodbye, Thomas.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sarah*

Thomas crumpled the letter and threw it into the fire as he finished reading. He stood and paced before the hearth, still in his damp clothes. A guttural roar boiled out of his belly, echoing throughout the chamber. He went to the table in the middle of the room, sweeping everything onto the floor. A great crash ensued as a vase full of flowers shattered, water splashing everywhere. He stood there panting for several minutes, his heart breaking with rage and disappointment. How could she betray him like this? How could he have been so wrong about her?

He rang for his valet and then sat down again, holding his head in his hands. When the man opened the door and saw the mess, he sucked in a breath. "Are you well, My Lord?"

His valet began picking pieces of the vase up.

"Leave it," Thomas instructed. "I need to change. One of the maids can clean that up in the morning."

His valet gave him a sideways look. What if he got up in the middle of the night and cut up his feet? However, he did not argue with his master. "Of course, sir."

He changed quickly into his nightshirt, handing over his wet things to be laundered.

"Shall I have the cook send up a tray for you, My Lord?"

"No, thank you. I am going to bed, Feters. Good night."

"Good night, sir." His valet left the room, gingerly stepping over the shards of glass and flowers strewn about the floor. Thomas did not care that the floor was a mess and would probably ruin the carpets. He climbed into bed, soul-tired.

He had been so looking forward to being a husband. Since his parents' death a few years earlier, he had been so lonely. He and Sarah were supposed to build a life together, a family. She had taken that away

from him now with her selfishness.

However, wasn't it better to know her true feelings before they had been married? Still, he would have wished that she had had the courage to tell him face-to-face rather than sneak away in the dead of night. All the dreams he had built up over the last few years had come crumbling to the ground.

Turning over onto his side, his face reflected the flickering flames of the fire, his face turning an ominous orange in the low light. "As God as my witness, I will have my revenge."

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